

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE AND
CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO BLENDING STEPFAMILIES –
A DYNAMIC SYSTEMS AND TRANSFORMATIONAL
LEARNING THEORIES APPROACH

by

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ABSTRACT

In the process of blending together, two single-parent family systems experience significant and unique challenges. Blending difficulties create barriers within the family system to relationship development and family functioning and without in academic, vocational and social arenas. With one-third of all Americans as part of stepfamilies, expanding research on this significant and growing population is vital.

The purposes of conducting this exploratory study were to: 1) gain a better understanding of what it is like to be part of a blending family system for both parents and children, 2) examine the impact of attitudes and behaviors on blending outcomes, and 3) provide empirically-based knowledge to support a strengths-based approach to blending stepfamilies to promote intervention, program and policy development.

Two theoretical frameworks (Dynamic Systems Theory and Transformational Learning Theory) organized and guided the study. The mixed-methods research design produced informative results about the lived experience of blending stepfamilies and highlighted six common thematic categories/constructs: Relational, Family Structure and System, Boundaries, Managing Conflict, Commitment and Communication. Communication was identified as providing the central role in promoting family blending processes and behaviors within each of the constructs. Study respondents offered “Three Most Important Points of Advice,” facilitators, and obstacles specific to stepfamily blending.

Correlation and multiple regression analyses provided consistent evidence that behavioral scales were strongly related to positive family blending outcomes, while in most cases the attitude scales had no such relationship. Study findings suggest that modifying beliefs may have little to no effect and that a more behavioral approach will be more effective in improving blending family outcomes.

The input of 286 blending parents and children yielded significant data, both in terms of quantity and quality. The mixed methods research design provided a lens to create a Blending Stepfamily Developmental Model, which highlights the transformation process of blending families and activities that influence outcomes. The results of this study have implications for practice, policy and research that can promote the development of education, clinical interventions, program and policy advancement, and spur additional studies on a variety of blending family related topics.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Demographic changes in recent decades have reshaped the structure of American families expanding from the traditional two-parent biological family to single-parent, stepparent, cohabiting parent and adoptive family structures and systems (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart 2001). The ever-changing and transforming modern demographic landscape is greatly affected by the diversity and variety of these different family forms, and the stepfamily has surfaced as a dominant social structure. Separation, divorce, cohabitation and remarriage are considered by some to be at the same time the cause as well as the result of the “incompletely institutionalized” family (Furstenberg, 1979; Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984). The traditional nuclear family is being reconstituted and “recycled” and is producing distinctively different family forms. What is driving the change in the current family system makeup of society and who is it affecting?

The United States has unusually high rates of divorce and remarriage with nearly one third of all Americans choosing to marry, divorce, and remarry. The divorce and remarriage rates rose and fell in parallel until the 1960s – as the divorce rate increased so did remarriage, an apparent indication that it was not the ideal of being married that people were rejecting, but first marriages. Many divorcees were remarrying. Yet since

that time while the divorce rate has risen, the rate for remarriage has continued to drop (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). An important question to answer particularly for blending stepfamilies is why the remarriage rate is dropping. The motivation for individuals to remarry is influenced by a variety of factors affecting specific subgroups. According to some studies, each of the influencing factors represents opportunity and choice: 1) young women are more inclined to remarry - perhaps due to having less life experience, less “baggage” (children, attachments, accumulations), and less personal preference to independent life, 2) women who have more children (3+) have a harder time finding an acceptable partner, 3) older women face a shrinking marriage market due to the majority of men having a preference to marry younger spouses, 4) non-Hispanic Whites are far more likely to remarry than their ethnic counterparts, and 5) remarriage rates are lower for the poor (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994).

Families struggle in their adjustment to divorce and remarriage and the stress of change in the family of origin system. More often than not, serious behavioral challenges result for those involved in blending families which affect school and work performance and strain existing relationships while impeding the development of new healthy ones. Without intervention, physical and emotional health problems often occur. Sadly, stepchildren experience more problems (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994) and suffer the most under the high level of stress of two different families attempting to merge together. Ultimately, this process can significantly impact the well-being of the stepchildren (Portie & Hill, 2005).

Remarriage affects a significant number of American parents and their children. Approximately 43% of all marriages are remarriages for at least one of the adults, and

nearly 65% of remarriages involve children from the prior marriage and from stepfamilies (National Stepfamily Resource Center, 2006). Walsh (1992) asserts that blended families “are quickly becoming the dominant family structure” (p. 709) in the United States. Both nuclear and stepfamilies are very dynamic and complex systems with many requirements to facilitate system homeostasis, change and improvement. Healthy functional family systems are mutually evolving and transforming in order to produce the greatest mutual benefit, satisfaction, and happiness for all family members. Optimal functioning in a family requires adherence by each member of the family system to tried and tested system standards and precepts. One of the glaring absences in family life of remarried households is well-defined roles, rules and norms (Cherlin, 1978). This missing link and a variety of questions are unique to stepfamilies. How do remarried couples and families function differently than nuclear or biological families? How are they able to balance loyalties to the biological family system and between the custodial and noncustodial parents and families? Are there different stressors and triggers common to all families in the process of blending? What are family blending successes and pitfalls? What part does communication play in the family formation process? Is stepfamily communication different from biological family communication? If so, how is it different? These and many other questions need solid, empirically-based answers in order to be of benefit to clinicians, therapists and counselors and particularly stepfamilies in pursuit of healthy family formation.

While there are a significant number of books, seminars, on-line resources and self-help guides, there is also a dearth of research-based information and evidence-based interventions to assist the distinctive population of stepfamilies/blending families.

Moreover, palpable social stigma for parents of a “failed marriage” and children of a “broken home” thwarts the process of successful information transfer/education and decreases receptiveness of blending families to seek interventions from the helping professions. There is a clear and present need for models of healthy stepfamily functioning “to guide and instill hope in the newly forming families” (Kelley, 1992, p. 580).

Statement of the Problem

Most stepfamilies in the process of reconstitution or “blending” lack the education, resources and social supports necessary for successful family formation. Until the 1970s when divorce replaced death of a spouse as the primary antecedent to remarriage, research on stepfamilies was overlooked (Cherlin, 1992; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Golish, 2003). Historically, the term “step” originated as a description of the situation where another adult would step in after the death of one parent in a family to become a life companion to the surviving parent and assist in caring for the children and family needs (Lord, 2009). Whether referred to as blended, binuclear, multi, combined or mixed, stepfamilies are here to stay. From the seminal body of research on stepfamilies, we learn that the stepfamily has become the fastest growing family form in the United States (Kelley, 1992) and a “normative American family” (Visher & Visher, 1990).

While research published on stepfamilies tripled in the 1990s (Coleman et al., 2000), the majority of this research employed the “deficit-comparison” approach (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Blending families are often viewed through a lens of dysfunction as a composite or amalgam of fractured marriages and broken families with inherent weaknesses predestined for failure. Stepfamilies are sometimes seen as

extracting or withdrawing resources from society rather than making a contribution or deposit. Popular literature and much of the academic research has been deficit-oriented, focusing on stepfamily problems and differences. The common juxtaposition of step and biological families views the former as damaged or impaired and suggestive of poor functioning (Coleman, Ganong, & Gangrich, 1985). Nevertheless, family scholars have consistently “warned against seeing stepfamilies as inherently problematic and inferior to other family forms” (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Golish, 2003; Kurdek, 1994; Schrodtt, 2006, p. 428). Rather than hyper-focusing on stepfamily deficiencies as measured against structurally and culturally different nuclear families, researchers, clinicians and stepfamilies would be better served if attention was turned to “behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that enhance and hinder stepfamily development” (Golish, 2003, p. 42; Schrodtt, 2006, p.428). As Gross (1987) affirmed, it is a disservice to use the rigid structure of the nuclear family model as a standard when fluid and permeable boundaries are necessary for healthy stepfamily functioning.

Researchers have identified several needs relative to stepfamily research: 1) greater knowledge and understanding about the process of blending stepfamilies (Portrie & Hill, 2005), 2) identification and impact evaluation of the contributing factors to successful stepfamily formation (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Golish, 2003; Michaels, 2006; Schrodtt, 2006), and 3) the replication and expansion of general research on stepfamilies (Kelley, 1992). There is also a social imperative to remove the frame of damage and dysfunction from stepfamilies and reframe these unique families as extraordinary family forms (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). Moreover, very few rigorous studies on intervention efficacy have been conducted. Consequently, it is imperative to

increase evidence-based research to support effective interventions and programs for stepfamilies in the process of blending (Forgatch, Debarmo, & Beldvas, 2005; Nicholson & Sanders, 1999). Finally, much research has emphasized the point of view of stepparents invoking some scholars to call for greater attention to be placed on the manner in which children experience the blending family process (Amato, 1994; Baxter et al., 2004; Gamache, 1997; Schrodtt, 2006). Hetherington and Jodl (1993) assert that, age dependent, children must be involved in the construction of the new family and take an active part in the process. In order to provide a clearer multidimensional perspective on the unique challenges that all blending participants face, the missing voice of the children in blending stepfamilies must be represented.

Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this study are: 1) to discover knowledge about the blending process of stepfamilies, 2) to explore the factors contributing to and inhibiting successful family formation in stepfamilies, 3) to reframe stepfamilies through a strength-based lens as unique and distinct family forms, 4) to expand the voice missing in much of the literature - the voice of the children involved in the blending process, and 5) to provide empirically-based research to promote intervention, program and policy development to assist in systemic change and improvement.

For the purpose of this study, stepfamilies will be defined as families whose kinship is determined by remarriage (Ashford & LeCroy, 2008). While research has been conducted on stepfamilies, the unique purpose of this study is to expand the knowledge base on the process of blending, identify concrete positive and negative contributing factors to blending families, and provide evidence-based data for clinical impact.

Evidence-based information can assist families and clinicians in shortening the learning curve and time to successful family formation.

For the average stepfamily, the first two years are the most difficult (Kelley, 1992) and it is estimated to take 3 to 5 years for families to restabilize after beginning the family formation process (Hetherington, 1993, 1999). The average stepfamily takes about seven years to finish the process of blending (Papernow, 1988). This study intends to further the research that has only just begun to focus on stepfamily strengths (Golish, 2003) and to understand the unique challenges that stepfamilies face. Many researchers, providers and policymakers feel that research is “just beginning to identify some of the family processes that make a difference for children’s long-term well-being” in stepfamilies (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994, p. 377). Though all members of the family benefit from successful family formation, children often have a “second chance” to experience a healthy parental relationship and a supportive and positive family environment.

Study Significance

The high prevalence of divorce, remarriage and merging of stepfamilies in society and the significant impact on individuals, couples and families warrants collaboration between research and practice for program and policy development. This topic is particularly relevant for the field of social work as the results of this study can spur additional significant research, provide data to assist in development of empirically-based programs and policies, and motivate greater provision of social services to this significant and growing population. Additionally, the study can have a clinical impact based upon the conclusion of Landsford et al. (2001) that “processes occurring in all types of families

are more important than family structure in predicting well-being and relationship outcomes” (p. 850). The creation and expansion of evidence-based education, services and interventions can make the difference in whether stepfamilies are successful or not in their quest for healthy family formation.

Moreover, the study outcome data are expected to further inform the dynamic systems theory respective to blending families, including the parent-child dynamic, the parenting system, and the available resources of the larger extended family system and community. The goal of this study is to assist policymakers and the public at large to better understand society’s conflicted and unresolved attitudes about stepfamilies and to reframe the dysfunctional view of blending families as “recycled” and to challenge the doctrine that blood not performance determines relationships and parenthood is an “ascribed” rather than “achieved” role (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994).

Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation is comprised of five chapters. This introductory chapter provides a statement of the problem of focus for this research along with the purpose and significance of the study. Chapter 1 concludes with this organizational outline. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature on blending stepfamilies. This chapter highlights important perspectives found in the literature including the significance and prevalence of blending stepfamilies in society, distinctiveness of stepfamilies as the fastest growing family form, unique challenges that stepfamilies face and the behavioral problems that affect stepfamily members. Two theoretical frameworks – 1) dynamic systems theory and 2) transformational learning theory - are presented as appropriate lenses with which to organize the literature and examine emerging themes. The literature is organized and

then presented through these two theoretical frameworks. The gaps in the research are discussed as identified and addressed by other researchers in the field. Finally, the results and findings from a qualitative pilot study are presented. The pilot study was conducted early in 2009 in preparation for this dissertation study. The pilot study results are highlighted and the implications and impact on this study are described.

Chapter 3 describes how the study was conducted highlighting the Mixed Methods (MM) research design, different phases in the research with their associated activities and sequence, and concludes with a justification of the design selection. The foci of both strands of research are described and the qualitative and quantitative research questions are presented. For the qualitative strand, the “Use of Self in Qualitative Research” is discussed in the context of the constructivist/interpretive research paradigm to provide an understanding of the researcher’s approach to co-constructing knowledge and meaning with participants through the collective blending of perspectives on the information shared and data gathered. A description is given of recruitment and sampling procedures which defines the target population and participant selection criteria, sampling technique, informed consent and Institutional Review Board approval process. A summary of data collection and analysis protocol is presented and the chapter concludes with a discussion of study strengths and limitations.

In Chapter 4, the findings of the study are presented and discussed. Following study chronology, findings for the qualitative strand of the MM research are first introduced and evaluated preceding the quantitative phase. In the quantitative phase, statistical analyses are offered which examined relationships and predictive values of attitudes, behaviors and positive blending outcomes. The final chapter provides

conclusions to the study findings by presenting answers to both sets of research questions. Implications and recommendations for practice, policy and research are then discussed, and the chapter and dissertation conclude with a presentation and description of the Blending Stepfamily Developmental Model and brief summary.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The following literature review utilized a variety of scholarly and professional academic, health care, behavioral and psychological databases, employing such search terms as blending family, stepfamily, remarriage and family therapy. First, the significance of stepfamily blending is illustrated, and then two theoretical frameworks are presented as lenses to organize and examine the literature: 1) dynamic systems theory and 2) transformational learning theory. The majority of studies reviewed, as well as those which are included here, fit into these two theoretical frameworks emphasizing their viability as credible hermeneutical instruments for this literature review and study. Following the review, the gaps in the literature will be highlighted and discussed. Finally, the researcher conducted a pilot study on blending stepfamilies (Feller, 2009), which proved to be crucial in providing an understanding of the need for this research and refining the focus for this dissertation topic. Consequently, the literature review concludes with a summary of the qualitative pilot study findings with its conclusions, contributions and recommendations.

Significance

According to the National Stepfamily Resource Center, the U.S. Census Bureau recently decided to discontinue releasing information on marriage, divorce and

remarriage rates. As a result, the most recent available comprehensive marriage analysis was conducted in the 1990 census (1988-1990). A summary of the statistics from that analysis follows: 52 to 62% of all first marriages will eventually end in legal (vs. psychological) divorce, about 75% of divorced persons eventually remarry, approximately 43% of all marriages are remarriages for at least one of the adults, nearly 65% of remarriages involve children from the prior marriage and form stepfamilies, and 60% of all remarriages eventually end in legal divorce (National Stepfamily Resource Center, 2006). Approximately one-third of all Americans are members of stepfamilies, and, unfortunately, a high percentage of those families will experience a second divorce (Booth & Dunn, 1994). Furthermore, Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet (1995) assert that 66% of all American women and 30% of all children are likely to spend some time in a stepfamily, using a liberal definition of stepfamily which includes cohabiting adult couples. The most common are stepfather families - those where the biological mother brings some or all of her children into the stepfamily.

According to Glick and Lin (1986), the stepfamily is the fastest growing family form in the United States and is rapidly becoming the most common family constellation in America (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1994). An estimated 10 million children under the age of 18 are involved in stepfamilies (Furukawa, 1994). As an emerging dominant family structure, it is important to consider the impact of blending on remarried couples and their children. Adjustment to divorce and remarriage can prove to be difficult, and these struggles can present themselves with clinical significance for some (Portie & Hill, 2005). Stepfamilies experience a variety of obstacles imbedded in the process of blending, including poor academic performance, work-related problems, and a multitude

of health-related problems: mental health – conduct disorder, depression, substance abuse and a variety of physical health concerns. In addition, stepfamily relations are characterized as more distant, conflictual, more prone to destructive parent-child coalitions, less competent in communication and problem-solving, and having a greater potential for violence (Michaels, 2006). “Children in stepfamilies...exhibit more problems on average than do children who grow up in nuclear families” (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994, p. 377) and research has also highlighted the high degree of distress observed in many stepfamilies (Nicholson & Sanders, 1999). This distress is exhibited through externalizing behaviors including school related problems – delinquency, academic expectations and achievement (Manning & Lamb, 2003) and internalizing behaviors – aggression, depression, anxiety, isolation (Jenkins, Simpson, Dunn, Rasbash, & O’Connor, 2005), peer and neighbor support, school attachment (Rodgers & Rose, 2002), and perceptions of discipline (Morin, Milito, & Costlow, 2001), which significantly affect the well-being of children in stepfamilies (Portie & Hill, 2005). These newly formed families also experience the stigma of the “stepfamily effect” from a society and culture that view them as an amalgamate product of broken homes (Portrie & Hill, 2005). Without intervention, children living in stepfamilies – particularly girls – leave their households at an earlier age (Goldsheider & Goldsheider, 1993).

Theoretical Frameworks

Dynamic systems theory, commonly known in social work literature as general systems theory, or simply systems theory (Anderson & Carter, 1990; Greene & Ephross, 1991; Hearn, 1979) is an excellent model for understanding the interrelated and interdependent nature of all parts of a system: 1) focal system, 2) subsystem, and 3)

suprasystem. Pertaining to the blending family, the primary system of attention and focus is the family unit, or the “focal system.” The individual members of the family are the “subsystem,” being smaller than and internal to the focal system. Finally, the “suprasystem,” also known as the environment, is external to the focal system and is comprised of the workplace, school, extended family, neighbors, church, etc. (see Figure 2.1)

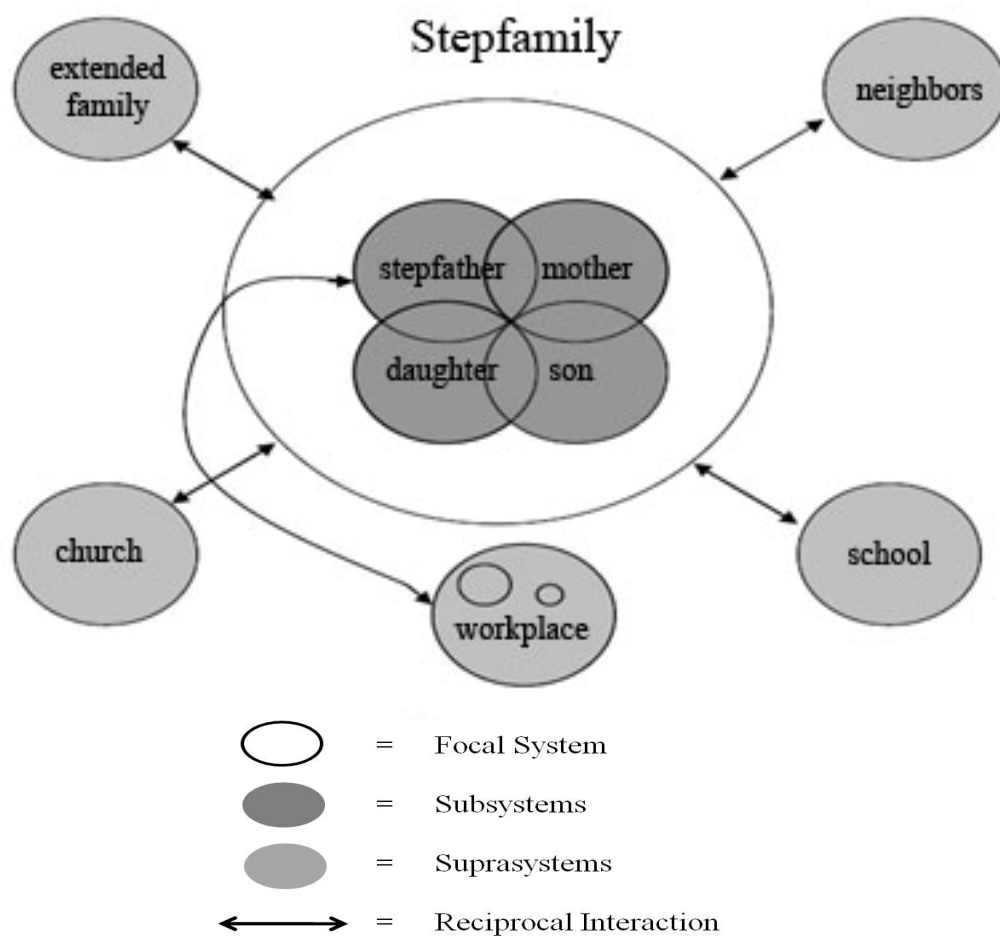


Figure 2.1. Stepfamily System. Adapted from: Robbins, S.P., Chatterjee, p., & Canda, E.R., (1998). *Contemporary Human Behavior Theory, A Critical Perspective for Social Work*. Boston: Alton and Bacon.

Just as the human body cannot be explained solely by a description of its organs, dynamic systems theory holds that “the whole is more than the sum of its parts” (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 1998, p. 38), and that the interaction between system parts and their relationship cannot be overlooked. The systems theory provides a person-in-environment lens, brings a greater understanding to social work practice, and gives insight into the phases of personal and community development (Robbins et al., 1998). A systems theoretical framework is critical in order to understand the family group dynamic and the blending interaction/relationship between the family system, subsystems, and suprasystems.

A related concept in systems theory with particular application to blending families is “equifinality,” which signifies that different parts of a system can reach the “same end from different beginnings” (Robbins et al., 1998, p. 42). Each stepfamily and each member of the stepfamily system come from different starting points, yet all can achieve the same positive or negative end depending on their choices and responses to the new blending family system dynamic. Because system theory simultaneously focuses on the individual and the environment, it can assist in identifying different levels at which effective interventions may take place.

The theory of transformative learning posits that significant learning involves meaning making that can lead to a transformation of one’s personality and worldwide view. A presenting dilemma or shocking or sudden critical event sets this type of learning in motion, which becomes developmental because it involves “movement toward more developmentally progressive meaning perspectives” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 192). In ways that both individuals and others recognize, transformational learning

changes and shapes people, making them “different” afterward. Both the breakup/dissolution and the merging of two family systems can be considered “presenting dilemmas” and can act as a catalyst to prepare individuals for change and growth. This lens is helpful in providing insight into the blending family experience.

Dynamic Systems Theory

The dynamic systems theory seeks to understand the blending family through the interrelated and interdependent nature of all parts of the family system. The systems perspective provides a macro view of subsystem interactions between parents and children within the focal system (family). Significant to the system is the fact that the interactions between subsystems are bidirectionally linked – they affect (and infect) one another in either positive or negative ways. Actions by one member of the system inevitably cause reactions/responses from other system members. Each system organ makes up a part of the system body, interdependent and interrelated. The effect of this interdependence and relationship between system parts can be seen in the following studies.

Kelley (1992) concluded that specific themes exist that are unique to stepfamilies and their family systems including hierarchies, boundaries, discipline, money and expression of love. In this study, family therapists who work with blending families emphasized the importance of establishing clear hierarchies and boundaries in the family system. Further, it was determined to be vital that the “parental subsystem is strong and separate from the offspring subsystem” (p. 585) and that all family members know who is and who is not part of the family to maintain the protective boundaries and health of the entire family system (Kelley, 1992). Finally, the study asserts that “stepfamilies are not

necessarily problematic, that they are different from biological families in ways that need to be recognized and accepted, and that they have different life cycle patterns” (p. 586). According to Cherlin and Furstenberg (1994), “remarriage restores a measure of balance between maternal and paternal lines” (p. 369) in the family system, where beforehand the focus and priority are strongly leaning toward the maternal side.

The structure within any family system is important, and it is an especially significant feature in stepfamilies. Flexibility is a key for the successful blending of families and the term has special meaning to stepfamilies (Kelley, 1992). There are various ways that being flexible facilitates the blending process. The stereotypical primary roles of nurturing mother and disciplinarian/chief breadwinning father do not work for many stepfamilies. Especially early on in the blending process, parents need to be flexible in their roles to accommodate the transitional struggles of their children with their new roles in the stepfamily and the associated emotions. It is important that stepparents work on developing a separate relationship with stepchildren and not try to replace the biological parent. In Kelley’s (1992) study on stepfamilies, half of the study participants had separate checking accounts and funds, and most children called their stepparents by their first name, reserving “Mom” and “Dad” for biological parents. However, the use of terms such as grandmother and grandfather were more easily applied to family members in the extended stepfamily system (Kelley, 1992). Family researchers and clinicians have stressed that stepfamilies need different structures and rules (McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Papernow, 1984; Sager et al., 1983; Visser & Visser, 1979, 1985, 1988; White & Booth, 1985).

Landsford, Ceballo, Abbey, and Stewart (2001) used data from the 799 families who participated in the 1992-1994 National Survey of Families and Households to “investigate the importance of family structure in predicting psychological well-being and relational quality of family members in five different family configurations” (p. 849). The five identified family structures are: 1) two-parent biological families, 2) single-mother structures, 3) stepfather families, 4) stepmother families, and 5) adoptive families. They found that the difference in well-being of family members from various family structures was no longer significant after controlling for the family process variable. Landsford et al. (2001) concluded that there is “the most support for the perspective suggesting that processes occurring in all types of families are more important than family structure in predicting well-being and relationship outcomes” (p. 850).

According to a study conducted by Leake (2007), the member of the family system who is most affected by the merging of two families is the adolescent. In the process of identity formation, teens have a need to feel like they belong, and a change in the family system challenges this important developmental step. While the adolescent-stepparent relationship is typically the most challenging in a newly formed family system, the quality of the relationship is the most significant predictor of “family belonging.” Healthy family functioning provides a forum for parents to model relationship skills and an environment of mutual nurturance where adolescents can flourish. A well-functioning stepfamily can offer adolescents a “second chance” (Leake, 2007).

Transformational Learning Theory

Through the lens of transformational learning theory, healthy family formation can be viewed as a learning process precipitated by the “shocking (or) sudden... event” of death, divorce, and remarriage (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. 88). This significant paradigm shift creates an opportunity for significant positive personal change and a springboard for self-renewal and self-reinvention. The transformative phase becomes fertile ground for the seeds of individual flexibility and family metamorphosis. Different aspects of family transformation - turning points, developmental trajectories, boundary management, solidarity and adaption, communication strengths and strategies, contributing factors to child behavior problems, therapeutic and parental training interventions – are prevalent in the studies that follow.

In a study of “Healthy Stepfamily Functioning” involving 20 stepfamilies (83 individuals), Kelley (1992) found that several themes suggested by stepfamilies are important for all families: flexibility, patience, respect, communication, and sense of humor. For stepfamilies, however, these themes take on even higher significance in family functioning and contribute to a healthy and complete transformation. In a similar study on the “Factors That Contribute to Stepfamily Success,” Michaels (2006) focused on healthy stepfamily formation. She discovered two overarching themes: “Informed Commitment” and “Sense of Family,” and her research provides a litany of what constitutes healthy stepfamily characteristics: central focus, realistic expectations, proactive stance, couple time/family time, faith in God, seeking professional guidance, waiting to introduce new partner, high level of maturity, “step” status non-existent, children age similarity, acceptance of new stepparent, stepparent “easy-going”

personality, mutual respect, welcoming feeling, supportive extended family, family identity creation via family activities, traditions and history, night time talk - “download,” pray together, and (# 1) supportive environment.

Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) used a modified retrospective interview technique with 53 blended families “to determine the types of turning points they reported experiencing and the developmental trajectories of their respective blended family's first 4 years” (p.291). They found 15 primary types of turning points. Ten of these turning points are reported with positive changes toward feeling like a family. These positive turning points include changes in household/family composition, holidays or special events, quality time, family crisis, reconciliation/problem solving, relocation or geographical move for household, prosocial actions, social network, change in employment for adults, and positive intrapsychic change. Conflict or disagreement, unmet expectations/disappointment, negative intrapsychic change, and breakup/divorce of marriage are the four turning points that were typically reported with negative changes toward feeling like a family. A final turning point, life changes for ex-spouse/nonresidential parent is “equally likely to be positive or negative in (the) reported effect on feeling like a family” (p. 302). Baxter et al. (1999) also identified five basic trajectories of development for the first 48 months that blending families are together: Accelerated, Prolonged, Stagnating, Declining, and High-amplitude Turbulent. The authors stated that the trajectories “differed in the overall positive-to-negative valence ratio, the frequency of conflict related events, the average amplitude of change in feeling like a family, and the current reported level of feeling like a family” (p. 291).

Based on the five trajectories developed by Baxter et al. (1999), Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, and Turman (2001) conducted a qualitative/interpretive methods analysis of 980 pages of interview transcripts with stepparents and stepchildren to achieve a holistic understanding of stepfamily blending across the first 48 months. The research focus was on positive and negative stepfamily transformative events and was “predicated on the recognition that change is not unidirectional” (p. 225). Viewed collectively and categorically, these events become part of multiple developmental processes rather than a “single sequence of stages,” aiding the recognition that “relationship development is a complex, sometimes messy, process that may be filled with turbulence” (p. 224). Braithwaite et al. (2001) classified 56.6% of the families in the study as accelerated and prolonged trajectory types, which have positive results at the end of 48 months; 18.9% of the families as declining and stagnating trajectory types, which have negative results, and 20.8% as high-amplitude turbulent trajectory type blending families. This analysis also identified three salient issues around which stepfamily development takes place: boundary management, solidarity and adaptation. The purpose and contribution of the research was to provide insight into the identified developmental patterns described above and a deeper understanding of how and why blended families grow, weaken, stagnate, and change over time.

Golish (2003) conducted 90 in-depth interviews with stepparents, parents, and stepchildren from 30 stepfamilies using a qualitative method to examine communication strengths in stepfamilies. The study concluded that all the stepfamilies “faced 7 primary challenges in their development: ‘feeling caught,’ regulating boundaries with a noncustodial family, ambiguity of parental roles, ‘traumatic bonding,’ vying for

resources, discrepancies in conflict management styles, and building solidarity as a family unit” (p. 41). In order to manage these challenges, each stepfamily used different communication strategies which differentiated strong stepfamilies from stepfamilies experiencing more difficulty. Golish (2003) found that strong stepfamilies generally reported “using everyday talk, more openness, spending time together as a family, communicating clear rules and boundaries, engaging in family problem solving, promoting a positive image of the noncustodial parent, and more consistency in perceptions about the severity of their problems” (p.41).

Interventions

In a randomized control group study, Nicholson and Sanders (1999) evaluated the effectiveness of therapist-directed and self-directed Behavioral Family Therapy (BFI) for the treatment of clinically significant child behavior problems in stepfamilies. Forty-two families with children from the age of 7 to 12 with significant oppositional or conduct behavior problems were recruited by media outreach and therapy referrals. Experimental groups were divided into two separate groups, one receiving *therapist-directed* Behavioral Family Intervention and the other receiving *self-directed* Behavioral Family Intervention. The behavioral intervention contained five core components: 1) stepfamily education, 2) positive parenting skills training, 3) cooperative parenting skills training, 4) problem solving and communication skills training, and 5) family activities training. Measurements were made by self-report and independent parent and stepparent reports of child behavior utilizing the following instruments: Child Behavioral Checklist (CBCL), Parent Daily Report (PDR), Child Depression Inventory (CDI), Child Manifest Anxiety Scale (CMAS), Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSEI) child form, and Parent

Problems Checklist (PPC). Specific measurements were made pre, post, and at six months. Forty-two families completed the intervention: 12 *self-directed*, 14 *therapist-directed* and 16 wait list control. Nicholson and Sanders (1999) found that “Families receiving BFI reported significantly greater reductions in child behavior problems and couple conflict over parenting from pre- to postintervention, and clinically significant and statistically reliable improvements on a range of family and child measures than control families (p.1).” Improvement was measured across the above-listed scales, which are described as possessing good reliability, validity and internal consistency. According to interviewer ratings of symptoms, there were no children in the nonclinical range at pre-intervention, compared with 69.2% in the nonclinical range at post. There were no significant differences between therapist-directed and self-directed programs.

Forgatch, Debarmo, and Beldavs (2005) recruited 110 recently married biological mother and stepfather families from a metropolitan area in the Pacific Northwest to participate in Marriage and Parenting in Stepfamilies (MAPS). MAPS is a theory-based intervention designed to improve child home and school adjustment problems in stepfamilies through the intervention of couple parenting practices. Based on Social Interaction Learning theory (SIL), MAPS was designed as an extension of the Parent Management Training-Oregon Model (PMT-O) developed at the Oregon Social Learning Center. Forgatch et al. (2005) tested for change in parenting as a mediator of change in child outcomes and hypothesized that changes in child outcomes would be predicted by changes in parenting. The study employed a randomized experimental longitudinal design and participants were measured at baseline, 6 months, 12 months, and 24 months.

Experimental groups participated in intervention sessions addressing skill encouragement, discipline, monitoring, problem solving, and positive involvement. Measurements were obtained through questionnaires, interviews, and direct observations. The Family and Peer Process Code, a global rating system, and computational procedures found to be internally and externally valid in the Oregon Divorce Study were used in data collection and scoring. The study found that changes in parenting over one year significantly predicted change in noncompliance (1-year: $B = -.31, p < .001$) and problem behaviors of children at home (1-year: $B = -.21, p < .05$) and later change in school problem behaviors (1-year: $B = -.27, p < .05$). MAPS findings replicate and extend those of the Oregon Divorce Study conducted with single mothers and their daughters.

Gaps in the Research

The literature reviewed on blending family has several limitations. First, several of the research studies used national survey data that were collected in the 1980s and 1990s, 7 to 14 years before the studies were actually conducted. Although the data provided a large sample, they are too dated to represent current trends in blending families. Portrie and Hill (2005) in their review of the literature concluded that “there is limited research on how blended families join together (p. 445)...(and)...qualitative studies are also necessary to create rich and descriptive understandings of blended families” (p. 450). Michaels (2006) echoed this deficiency, concluding that “there is little research focusing directly on the factors that contribute to successful stepfamily formation” (p. 55). Cherlin and Furstenberg (1994) confirm this sentiment, stating that existing literature “need (s) to be supplemented with qualitative research on the circumstances under which parents and children socially construct family bonds” (p.

376). After providing a confirmation of a variety of themes indicative of making positive contributions to stepfamily blending and providing a clinical/nonclinical population contrast, Kelley (1992) concludes that her exploratory research on healthy stepfamily functioning was designed “to develop ways by which well-functioning stepfamilies can be studied” (p. 586). She recommended the “replication of this study with larger samples and in several geographical areas of the country” (p. 586). Braithwaite et al. (2001) also urged researchers to “glean the success stories from blended families and spend more time identifying what successful blended families do” (p. 243). Additionally, none of the literature reviewed addresses the issue of cultural competency in blending families. Portrie and Hill (2005) also emphasized this concern in their review of the literature: “no information currently addresses blended families of color, gay and lesbian blended families, and the joining of culturally different families” (p.450).

Perhaps of greatest clinical importance, research addressing specific behavioral intervention methods for blending stepfamilies is limited. Lawton and Sanders conducted the first review of research with blending family interventions in 1994. Nicholson and Sanders (1999) maintained that “few randomized controlled trials have been conducted with stepfamilies” (p. 2). In this literature review, only two studies were identified that specifically evaluated blended family interventions and utilized randomization and control groups in their research (Forgatch, Degarmo, & Beldvas, 2005; Nicholson & Sanders, 1999). Forgatch et al. (2005) emphasize “the near nonexistence of efficacious step-family-based interventions” (p. 1). Most research currently available is based on interventions first used with nuclear family populations, which then adjusted to meet the characteristics of blending families. Ironically, the knowledge that some interventions

developed for use with nuclear families are effective in addressing problems in blending families challenges the belief that blending families are inferior to other family forms. While blending families are unique and require cultural and family-dynamic specific interventions, the use of traditional family interventions and common factors influencing positive outcomes can provide some benefits. Finally, few articles met the criteria for true evidence-based research. Evidence-based research (EBR) is the consistent and efficient production of the best evidence (Gibbs, 2003) using rigorous scientific methods of qualitative, quantitative or mixed methodology. EBR provides a tool that practitioners can combine with their clinical expertise and client values and expectations to take appropriate action (Gibbs, 2003). EBR is essential for the education and edification of professionals and practitioners in any field of study as well as the general public.

It is clear from the literature that blending families face more challenges than traditional nuclear families. Stepfamilies are unique and need especially high levels of communication and effective conflict management skills. Consequently, there is great demand for additional research on effective interventions for this population. Although there is existing literature, Internet websites and other resources available to inform and educate family therapists and blending families, there is a paucity of evidenced-based studies and interventions. The growing prevalence of stepfamilies in society, the challenging process of blending, and the lack of quality research on family blending and culturally specific interventions makes this study both relevant and necessary.

Qualitative Pilot Study

After an initial literature review, a qualitative pilot study was conducted (Feller, 2009) in preparation for this dissertation study. The pilot study was performed to assess

the accessibility and responsiveness of participants in the target population, evaluate/confirm repetitive themes in the literature and test study protocol. Significant insights resulting from this preliminary research provided a concrete focus for this dissertation study. One overarching theme was prevalent throughout the pilot study and is highlighted in the literature: the process of blending families is a paradox. On one hand, bringing two completely different families and their unique cultures together is an incredibly difficult challenge. On the other, creating a warm and loving marriage and making a difference in the lives of children from “broken homes” can be one of the most rewarding experiences a human being and parent can have. The feelings of some blenders are captured in the recruiting mantra of the U.S. Army, “It’s the toughest job you’ll ever love.” Social stigma attached to divorce, remarriage and stepfamilies adds a constant burden to families in the process of blending. One mother in the pilot study accentuated the negative connotation of the “step” moniker: “I hate the word ‘step.’ It feels like somebody’s got to get walked on.” This visual depiction underscores the social disability experienced by these families and provides a context for the invisible challenges involved in merging stepfamilies in modern society.

The summary of the pilot study findings that follows is both germane and significant to this dissertation study as the pilot study tested many of the repetitive themes and findings in the literature and served to shape this dissertation study. The pilot study was performed with three remarried couples: two remarried couples in the process of blending their two families and one widow who had participated in family blending two times, once for 10 years and a second time for 13 years before her husband of the third marriage passed away. There were three female and two male participants ranging in age

from 30 to 78 years. The mean age of the participants was 54.1 years. These three families had a combination of 25 children, 11 girls and 14 boys, ranging in ages from 6 to 31 with a mean age of 16.7 years. Two couples had joint custody of their children, and custody was a nonissue for the third couple whose spouses were both deceased at the time they were blending their families. Four of the participants were White/non-Hispanic, one described herself as mixed race, and all considered themselves to be native Utahans. They reported their religious affiliation to be with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or LDS faith. Occupations of the participants included vocations in professional sales, education, and transportation. Two of the three mothers were stay-at-home moms. The lengths of the current marriages were 3, 13 and 20 years; the mean marriage duration was 12 years.

The researcher developed a semistructured interview guide and conducted intensive in-depth focused interviews with participant couples in their own homes. The interview focused on the process of family formation, precipitating events to family change, relationship development within stepfamilies and the events and factors that influence both positive and negative blending outcomes. Six basic questions guided the interview: 1) Would you tell me a little bit about yourself? 2) Can you tell me about your family? 3) What is it like to be part of a blending family? 4) How would you rate your family blending on a scale of 1 to 10? 5) What helps and what hinders your family blending? 6) If you had a magic wand, what three things would you do/change in your family? Interviews were conducted in a single session and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview data were collected in audiotaped interviews which were transcribed verbatim at the completion of the interviews.

Pilot Study Findings

First, it is important to note that all blenders in the pilot study considered themselves relatively successful in their blending activities, rating themselves 4, 8+, 8 on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 signifying the highest success; mean = 6.7. Participants reported their *greatest challenges* to be the number of children involved, ex-spouses/noncustodial parent and maintaining consistency and equality. The *greatest strengths* were expressed as spouses, personal space, maintaining equality and supporting one another. Several *common themes* emerged from the study: 1) *communication* and 2) *boundaries* appeared as the top two themes, each surfacing more than 100 times throughout the interviews; 3) *family structure/system*, 4) *managing conflict*, 5) *relational issues*, and 6) *commitment* followed in descending order of predominance. Various subthemes emerged under *communication*: using humor, teaching/expressing empathy, family councils, non-use of “step,” spousal support/protection, directness, and being proactive. The importance of clear, sincere, proactive communication in the blending process was reiterated repeatedly and is emphasized in one of the most moving statements made by a father to his new stepchildren: “I know you’ve got a dad, but if it’s okay, I’d like to be a dad too.” Family councils were considered to be an important factor and a forum where all family member voices could be heard. One couple remarked that their younger kids “loved it” when they gathered together for “family chats” to discuss how things were going or something that had become a problem. The parents asked for ideas and input from the kids, and responses were overwhelmingly positive. All families used family councils; one mom confessed, “I wish we’d had more.”

Participant responses support previous research that cautions the use of “step” terms in referring to family members. Spousal support and protection were deemed to be an important part of couple communication and relationships. All three couples expressed appreciation in feeling the unequivocal support of their spouses. Mothers particularly spoke of having been supported in their role as stepmom, choosing to take a job, and being defended against attacks by stepchildren and ex-wives. “(Dad) protects me from her (dad’s ex); he totally filters, and if anything is discussed it’s between him and her and it doesn’t involve me...” describes the spousal support that helps stepparents feel “protected” and provides insulation in the couple’s relationship. The value of being direct yet diplomatic is implicit in healthy communication, and parents who were proactive were able to manage potential problems.

Establishing and maintaining appropriate *boundaries* was a close second to communication in importance to blenders. Setting clear expectations provides structure for blending families and helps them come together as a new family system. One challenge for couples and especially for their children is dealing with different expectations from one house to another. Children, especially younger kids, become confused and sometimes angry having “two sets of rules” to live by. Parents expressed frustration feeling like they have to “go back to square one every time” the kids come back home. One couple (bio-dad and stepmom) who shared custody (with bio-mom and her husband) felt that it was imperative that each child have his/her own personal space - “their own toys, their own clothes, their own rooms,...their own stuff, their own everything, (and) their stuff’s off limits” to everyone else. The most poignant example of setting appropriate boundaries was given by a stepmom to her new youngest stepdaughter

who had been accustomed to sleeping with her biological mother, who had left the marital bedroom prior to the divorce. The young girl asked her new stepmother, “So will you be sleeping with me?” After talking with the young girl, the stepmom came to better understand the unhealthy precedent set by the biological mom and the girl’s feelings of separation and abandonment upon her mother’s departure from the home. The stepmom responded, “I will come and lay down with you and we’ll read a story..., but then I’m going to sleep with your dad because that’s where I should be sleeping.”

Having defined, negotiated roles in the family relating to discipline and basic responsibilities was especially important for parents. “Consistency” was stressed as being critical for bringing two families together and particularly important for families blending younger children. With the youngest family involved in this study, the couple raised the issue of boundaries, expectations, consistency and structure 29 times in their interview. Limits to vulnerability, logistics, impact of the other/noncustodial parent and having a fresh start were also considered to be important. One mom related how the ex-wife showing up unannounced impacted the family, was upsetting to stepmom and the children, and ultimately was disruptive of the blending process. Having a fresh start in a new house and a new community for both blending families was regarded as a plus in the goal to be seen as and feel like one family.

The third thematic area *commitment*, included uncertainty of outcome, confident in outcome, evidence of positive outcome, and marital unity. Ambivalence, confidence and describing evidence of positive blending outcomes were a common theme. Those who were most confident in their positive outcomes were quick to provide examples to demonstrate their success. Throughout their illustrations participants spoke often of

“marital unity” as being a key factor in their achievements. “I tell you what the biggest, hugest thing for us and why it works as well as it does is how aligned (mom) and I (dad) were in our parenting styles. We are so on the same page 99% of the time.” Seeking out and using available resources were considered to be a reflection of commitment to the success of the marriage and family blending. Of the resources mentioned, professional counseling was viewed as useful, but only one of the couples had actually used it. Strangely enough, their counseling experience involved the biological parents and none of the stepparents. Dad didn’t believe counseling had changed anything, but he felt that it “helped you deal with it” and “it changed how I communicated.” On a humorous note, when asked what other resources would be helpful; one stepmom replied “a cook and a housekeeper... (and) a nanny.”

Relation issues emerged as the fourth theme. In it were included the subcategories of time spent as family/one-on-one time, individualized treatment, traumatic blending, extended-family impact, age of kids, traumatic event, equality, and differences in parenting. Time spent as a family and one-on-one time were noted as significant factors in blending for stepparents and stepchildren. One stepmother related how she took her three youngest stepchildren on trips and occasionally took just one child with her and they would meet up with their truck-driver father and spend family time together. Spending time with bio-dad was considered to be equally important. One couple described their routine of having dad spend time every other weekend with just his biological kids. Stepmom emphasized “they (kids) need to know that you’re (dad) still their dad...no matter what...and... one-on-one time has helped insure that.” In one of the large blending families, the parents stressed the need for individualized treatment of their

children, particularly in disciplining. All children respond differently and individually to new methods of discipline. One size does not fit all children, and this was seen as especially true with blending families.

While differences in parenting styles between blending parents and the other-custodial or noncustodial parents were evident in all cases, it surfaced 26 times in one interview. Consistent with earlier expressions of dismay with dual expectations and inconsistency from house to house, the youngest couple interviewed had the most difficult time with the differences in parenting styles. Having children of similar ages was generally perceived to be beneficial. Although sibling rivalry naturally occurs, the similarity in interests, activities, education (schools) and life focus for the children and the family was a plus. “Equality” was the collective goal and mantra of all blending parents. Interestingly, for the youngest couple it was their *destiny*, for the middle-aged couple it had been the *goal*, and the oldest couple considered it to have been the *master key* to their blending success. Three traumatic events surfaced: 1) divorce, 2) blending, and 3) unexpected death of a stepdad. While these painful, life-changing events created individual turmoil and family distress, they also produced an opportunity for family renewal and bonding, thus supporting a transformational learning theory approach to blending families.

Managing conflict surfaced as a fifth common theme and included the subtopics of positive attitude, stepchild resistance, personal biases and discipline. It is a given that positive attitude is the foundation for any type of successful change, yet remaining positive is essential in managing blending family conflict. On one end of the spectrum, one mother described her attempt to prevent a stepson from running away by “sitting on

him” and declaring, “Oh, hell no. You’re not going anywhere.” At the other end, one husband consistently responds to the challenges of blending this way: “Just think, if it wasn’t for our children, we’d have nothing to be concerned about. We can get through this. This is nothing!” His wife gratefully and proudly declared that this stepdad “won them (his stepchildren) over...lock, stock and barrel.” Another stepmom used a “look for the positive in others” approach, having all the children “sit down and write 10 or 15 things that they like about the other person.” Personal biases were typically timidly expressed. Yet in the interview with the widow/single stepmom, prejudices toward the stepchildren as “passive-aggressive” and an “egocentric bunch” were overt and emphatic. The strong partiality of one couple for sports over video games is underscored by stepmom’s stern declaration that video games are “not an extracurricular activity” and do little more than encourage kids to be “sitting developing thumb skills.”

The final thematic category that materialized was *family structure/system*. Subthemes included family activities, work, routine, religion and approach. Blending families inherently come to the new environment and relationship with different approaches. Previously developed and established family cultures and values influenced how everyone approached such things as family responsibilities and chores, daily routine and religion. Polar opposites are expressed in two basic approaches to the blended family: 1) “It’s not my family or her family. It’s our family.” “We just decided to make it function as one family, not his, mine and ours.” and 2) “We basically set up a deal where we have our money and I have my money and he has his money.” The statement, “There’s differences between the way we live the religion versus the way they (noncustodial parent and spouse) live the religion” depicts different approaches even

when two families shared the same religious faith. Family activities were described as one of the greatest facilitators and accelerators of blending. Families participated in various types of activities, e.g., parties, dinners, outings, holidays, and vacations. All served to bind the newly formed families together. For one family, dinners and holidays were top priorities. For another, “we do a ton together,” and the whole family “support(s) whatever kid is performing...whether it’s a baseball game or a basketball game or dance or cheer competition.” One mom described the “quintessential blending moment” as the annual family vacation to Lake Powell. Though it “involved major planning and doing,” these family vacations were described as “fun” and “delightful” when “the burdens of real life were lifted.” “It was something that they (all the children) truly looked forward to and enjoyed and treated each other as family.” These fun-filled family times brought down the individual and family walls and helped everyone feel as one family. Enjoyable family activities were reported to melt away animosity and enmity and just having fun became the collective focus.

Pilot Study Conclusions, Contributions and Recommendations

Blenders can make a significant difference in the lives of their children. Often, children of blenders come from less than optimal circumstances and from fairly dysfunctional family environments. For many children, the new family and marital relationship may be their first exposure to and modeling of a healthy marriage and intimate relationship. The blending effort was described as “huge” considering the challenges of stepchildren resistance, “competing” with the ex-parent, and the fluctuation in pain, joy and a variety of other emotions.

Couples of different ages and generations volunteered to participate. Interestingly, the more youthful the parents, the greater was the prevalence of impatience and dogmatic response. Emphasizing the principle of greater maturity with age, the responses of older, more experienced blenders were typically more thoughtful, seasoned and less emotional. The older the couple, the more time-tempered was their perspective and response. While various other ancillary issues surfaced in the interviews, the stigma attached to divorce, broken homes and stepfamilies permeated the dialogue.

Transformational learning and dynamic systems theories provide a combined paradigmatic lens through which this study can be interpreted and meaning made of the findings. By the very nature of their life experiences, stepfamilies have been through significant traumatic and often sudden events – divorce, death, and remarriage. These transformational experiences prepare families, as individuals and as a unit, for change and growth. Because the process of blending families is a paradox, this change can be at the same time difficult and rewarding. The difficulties faced by family blenders surfaced repeatedly in the study themes - communication, boundaries, commitment, relational issues, managing conflict and family structure/system. These relational exchanges are also symbolic of the interactions inherent in family systems. Most problematic interactions occur between the parent and children subsystems, and because they are bidirectionally linked, their effects, positive or negative, are felt both ways. Every member organ impacts the entire family body. The collective interview voice expressed these blending struggles and rewards. Reflective of the family system is the axiom “When mama ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy,” yet the same can be said of each family member. The interrelated and interdependent nature of families demands that all feel joy

and/or that all feel pain. The paradox of joy and pain of the blending process was omnipresent in the study.

The bottom line for stepparents working on blending their two families can be summarized as follows: 1) rescuing their children from “broken” homes and providing healthy, functional family environments can be life-changing and transformational for everyone involved, and 2) healthy changes in a family system create a feeling of family belonging and an environment of mutual nurturance where family members can flourish and children get a “second chance” (Leake, 2007). The family acts as an institution of education, a laboratory and a refuge for its members. For stepfamilies, having education about healthy relationships and opportunities to put the lessons into practice can provide practical tools for life and protection against the social stigma associated with being a stepfamily.

Based on the pilot study findings and conclusions, the following recommendations were made for future studies and most were incorporated into this dissertation study: 1) include children; their perspective is imperative to gain a holistic understanding of the blending process, especially from a family systems point of view; 2) include focus groups to expand the research voice and fill in the missing pieces of the blending family puzzle; 3) explore preparation as an important dimension to blending, e.g., preparatory activities prior to remarriage/blending such as seeking information and materials counseling; and lastly, 4) expand on topics such as family time, discipline, religion/faith and impact, feeling of couple that they are “meant to be together,” sense of family/family identity, siblings becoming big brothers/sisters, and the effect of marital happiness. Finally, the pilot study made a significant contribution to refining the process

and preparation for this dissertation study. The ultimate goal of this research is to provide new research-based knowledge that will facilitate the creation of tools for blending families that can make the difference between living a troubled life with conflict and dysfunction or promoting healthy relationships within the stepfamily system.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to describe, explain and support the selection of the study methods, including research design, research questions, research paradigm, use of self, recruitment and sampling procedures, blending family survey example, data collection and analysis, and contribution of the research.

Research Design

This study utilized a mixed methods (MM) research design combining both qualitative and quantitative methods. The MM research design was particularly well-suited for this study as it allowed the researcher to “confirm, cross-validate, or corroborate findings within a single study” (Creswell et al., 2003, p. 229). The MM approach is totally integrated as depicted in Zone C of Figure 3.1. Integration of methods supports the achievement of the representation/saturation trade-off, which is a goal of this MM study. The MM design was selected to provide both the depth and breadth necessary to answer the research questions and to imbue this study with creativity and flexibility, which are crucial to its success.

While “there is no widely accepted typology of MM sampling strategies,” the provisional typology developed by Teddlie and Yu (2007) includes sequential MM sampling. Sequential QUAL-QUAN was employed to allow for qualitative validation of

Purposive-Mixed-Probability Sampling Continuum

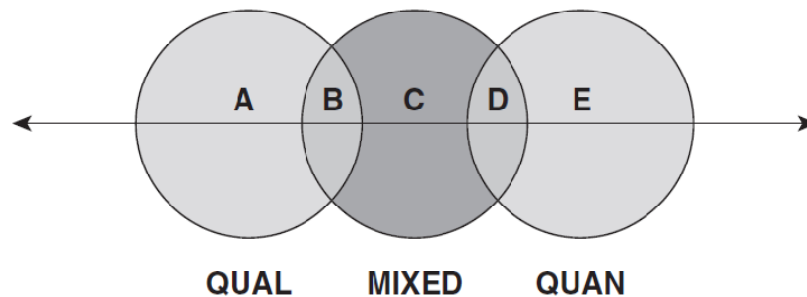


Figure 3.1. Mixed Methods Research Continuum

Reprinted with permission from Sage Publications, Source: Teddlie (2005).

Note: Zone A consists of totally qualitative (QUAL) research with purposive sampling, whereas Zone E consists of totally quantitative (QUAN) research with probability sampling. Zone B represents primarily QUAL research, with some QUAN components. Zone D represents primarily QUAN research, with some QUAL components. Zone C represents totally integrated mixed methods (MM) research and sampling. The arrow represents the purposive-mixed-probability sampling continuum. Movement toward the middle of the continuum indicates a greater integration of research methods and sampling. Movement away from the center (and toward either end) indicates that research methods and sampling (QUAN and QUAL) are more separated or distinct.

salient blending family themes and issues, which were incorporated in the subsequent quantitative survey. In a mixed methods study, interviewees may either be selected from surveys (Richards, 2005), or conversely surveys are often developed from information gleaned from interviews. The qualitative interviews and focus groups of this mixed methods design assisted in refining the survey instrument and informed the total MM survey. Based on the outcomes of other MM QUAL-QUAN studies with objectives similar to this study, a successful QUAN strand of this study simply could not have been conducted without the information from the QUAL strand (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Utilizing this study method in the experiential stage enhanced the analysis, conclusions and recommendations in the interpretation stage.

The study was conducted in two phases: Phase I - qualitative, Phase II - quantitative. A summary of the study phases and flow, recruitment strategy, participant definitions, categories, qualifications and targets follow in the Sampling Matrix in Table 3.1.

The first phase of the study was the qualitative strand. Phase I was interpretive and sought to identify and describe recurring patterns of behavior and unveil meanings from the experiences of members of stepfamilies in the early years of life as a blending family. Grounded theory methods were used to govern this research. The grounded theory systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing the qualitative data (Charmaz, 2006) was employed to assist in capturing a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of how blending parents and blending children as actors understand and ascribe meaning to their actions and experiences as part of a blending family system. Grounded theory is linked with constructionism and symbolic interactionism, all of which require that the researcher join the research setting and become part of the study (Charmaz, 2006). The qualitative strand intended to achieve saturation and groundedness (repetition of themes), density (connectedness of themes), and provide significant depth to this research.

In Phase II of the study, the quantitative strand, the survey instrument was developed to increase representativeness and provide a breadth of information (Teddle & Yu, 2007). The survey was created to explore and validate various common themes identified in the literature, confirmed in the pilot study, and again in Phase I of this study. The phase I qualitative strand served its designed purpose and confirmed the previously identified themes and validated their value as critical for inclusion in the Phase II survey.

Table 3.1: Sampling Matrix

	QUALITATIVE PHASE	QUANTITATIVE PHASE	TOTAL STUDY
PARTICIPANT CRITERIA	Complex Blending Family (CBF) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both parents bring at least (1) child to the marriage Current marriage = at least 2nd 	Same	Same
RECRUITMENT	Purposive, snowball sampling – word of mouth, flyers – agencies, counseling centers, U of U College of Social Work, U of U campus, churches, other community sites <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Informed consent Custodial parental permission Assent to participate 	Same	Same
STEPPARENT PARTICIPANTS	Stepparents of CBF 10 couples (X 2 participants = 20) N = 10 couples / 20 individuals	Stepparents of CBF N = 127	Stepparents of CBF N = 147 total stepparents (SP)
STEPCHILDREN PARTICIPANTS	Children involved in CBF 3 focus groups (X 3 participants = 9) N = 9	Children involved in CBF N = 130	Children involved in CBF N = 139 total stepchildren(SC)
TOTAL	N = 29	N = 257	N = 286

The repetitive responses and themes from the literature, pilot study, and Phase I of this study were incorporated into the survey to further test their saliency and validity. This mixed methods research design was appropriate to capture a holistic picture of the blending process of stepfamilies and contributed much to the researcher's ability to interpret the study findings as an integrated whole (Maxwell & Loomis, 2003).

Research Questions

Two sets of research questions guided this mixed methods research design. One set is qualitative and the other set is quantitative.

Qualitative

The qualitative phase of the study was designed to explore the lived experience of stepfamilies in the process of family formation/blending by answering the following research questions:

1. How do stepfamilies experience the process of blending/family formation?
2. What do stepfamilies see as factors contributing to positive blending outcomes?
3. What do stepfamilies view as impediments/obstacles to successful family formation?
4. What advice do stepfamilies have to offer other stepfamilies from their own blending experience?

Quantitative

The quantitative phase of the study was designed to evaluate the association and contribution of attitudinal and behavioral characteristics related to both positive and negative family formation outcomes by answering the following research questions:

1. Is there an association between thematic attitudinal and behavioral characteristics in stepfamilies?
2. Do behavioral characteristics function as contributing factors to blending success or blending failure in stepfamilies?
3. What behavioral characteristics contribute most to blending success in stepfamilies?
4. What behavioral characteristics contribute most to blending failure in stepfamilies?

Research Paradigm

The qualitative strand of this study was approached from a constructivist/interpretive perspective; the aim was to construct, interpret, and understand the essence of stepfamily blending. This research paradigm is based on the philosophical beliefs and assumptions of constructivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), which has its roots in symbolic interactionism and relativism. Under the constructivist approach, the specific interest is in the research interaction and the co-construction of knowledge between the participants as the researched and the researcher. Knowledge and truth are the result of individual and joint perspectives. The knowledge that emerged from interviews with the research participants was more created and less discovered. In the constructivist research paradigm, the methodology is dialectical and hermeneutical. Knowledge and

interpretation are the result of a collective, not an individual, process and meanings are intersubjectively shared. The researcher's interactions with the "passionate participant" facilitated multi-voice reconstruction of knowledge and truth (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Conceptually, the MM research design, research paradigm and the selected theoretical frameworks fit together to provide a lens that has informed and shaped the research. According to Anfara and Mertz (2006), a theoretical framework provides a filter through which a defensible interpretation can be developed making a significant contribution to elevating qualitative research to a level of science.

Use of Self in Qualitative Research

Use of self is implicit in both the constructivist research paradigm and grounded theory methods of qualitative research. Both constructivism and grounded theory require active use of self in research. The interest and investment of the researcher in this study is both personal and professional. He has been intimately involved in blending two families over the past 4 ½ years. Between both families, the researcher has participated in the blending process of a combined nine children, three child in-laws by marriage of three children, and one grandchild. Due to his role as a participant "blender," parent, and husband, the researcher has developed a passion for this topic. Through personal experience, a unique understanding of the idiosyncratic challenges of blending two separate and distinct family systems and cultures has developed. The researcher also has clinical experience working with divorced, single-parent, two-parent, blending couples and families. Through these collective experiences, the researcher has acquired a distinct tripartite perspective of stepparent, therapist and researcher.

While personal experience provides additional insight into the blending family process, the researcher recognizes the need to pay close attention to the perspective, assumptions and personal biases that he brings to the research. Potential biases were addressed and managed by recording personal perceptions and emotional responses in journals and memos and noting concerns about biases. The research records were data checked with the study participants, committee members and other researchers and staff to protect against researcher bias. A more detailed description of member checking is provided under the data collection and analysis section that follows.

Recruitment and Sampling Procedures

The target population for this study included both clinical and non-clinical families, i.e., those who are or have participated in some form of counseling/therapy and those who have not. A blend of participants was sought in order to achieve a cross-sectional response of perspectives and biases of both groups. Contrary to hypotheses of the researchers in a study of blending families, nonclinical families were found to be significantly more cohesive than clinical families (Kelley, 1992). Consequently, obtaining a mix of both clinical and nonclinical populations was one objective of this research.

The criteria for participants were expanded. Initially, the selection criteria excluded families whose parents had been married less than 2 years. The time requirement was omitted in favor of gaining insight and perspective from blending stepfamilies whose parents are newly and recently married. Participants for both phases of the study who met the following two criteria were included: 1) they represent a *complex blending family (CBF)* - both parents bring at least one child from a previous

marriage, and 2) the current marriage is at least a second marriage for both of the spouses. Eligible children participants had parents who met criteria 1 and 2. While a focus of the research targeted complete stepfamilies, individual members of CBFs who met study participant criteria were eligible and participated in the study. There were no other selection criteria regarding specific target characteristics for the population of focus. Participants were recruited by contacting local behavioral health care clinics/agencies (public and private), posting and emailing flyers and by word of mouth in the community. In addition, staff briefings regarding the study purpose and participant requirements were conducted in some of the clinics/agencies that elected to participate. Flyers were distributed and posted only after receiving approval from participating agencies and clinical counseling centers, the University of Utah, and other community sites. The objective of using multiple sites for data collection was to capture as broad and representative a sample as possible of the target population.

The research study employed purposive, snowball sampling, a technique “that documents diverse variations and identifies common patterns” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). An informed consent agreement was used with parents and adult children to explain the purpose of the research and to notify prospective participants of the study objectives, risks and benefits. Participating parents were asked if they wanted their children to be given the opportunity to participate in the study. Children of any age were eligible to participate, and after receiving parental permission, children under 18 years of age who had signed parental consent forms were asked if they wanted to participate in the study. Any children under 18 years of age expressing interest in participating were given an assent form and received an explanation of the purpose of the study, risks and benefits.

All prospective children participants were then asked if they had any questions before signing the assent form. Approval from the University of Utah Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained as this study involved human subjects.

In qualitative Phase I, 10 remarried couples in the process of blending their 2 families were interviewed, and 3 children focus groups with 3 members each were also conducted. The target for couple interviews was 10, and the target was met. While the focus groups targeted 50% representation of stepchildren belonging to stepparents involved in the couple interviews and targeted 5 stepchild members for 5 focus groups, only 3 focus groups with 3 stepchildren in each group were conducted due to lack of available and/or willing to participate stepchildren from the target families. Additionally, only 5 out of 9 of the stepchildren who participated in the focus groups were from stepparents who had participated in couple interviews. Consequently, stepchildren focus groups were made up of a variety of combinations of stepfamilies. A total of 13 qualitative interviews/focus groups were conducted in Phase I.

By design, the quantitative survey instrument that was utilized in Phase II was informed and refined by the pilot study and the qualitative research conducted in Phase I. In Phase II, two separate surveys (Blending Stepfamily Survey – Parents, Blending Stepfamily Survey – Children) were created and designed to be completed individually by both parent and child study participants who came from any stepfamilies meeting CBF and participant criteria outlined above. In other words, eligible stepfamilies did not need to have any other family participation in order to participate in the Phase II survey, nor did they have to participate in the qualitative interviews/focus groups in order to be eligible to participate in the quantitative survey. Though the study targeted entire

families and recruited from amongst Phase I study participants, the qualitative and quantitative phases of this study were independent.

The target for participants in Phase II of this study was N = 120, 60 stepparents and 60 stepchildren. The target was significantly exceeded as 127 stepparents participated in the parent survey, and 130 stepchildren participated in the children survey for a total of 257 survey participants in Phase II. Nearly a 50% / 50% parent/child respective voice was achieved. The study target for a 50/50 male/female ratio could not be controlled, particularly in an on-line, voluntary, anonymous survey. The quantitative survey in Phase II resulted in the following gender participant results: parent survey – 71.6% mothers and 28.4% fathers; children survey - 60% daughters and 40% sons; total survey – 54.8% females / 45.2% males. The qualitative interviews were 100% heterosexual couples and consequently a 50/50 female/male mix, and the focus groups had 3 females and 6 males, 33.3% / 66.7% respectively. The total participation by gender for the entire study: 55.3% female and 44.7% male. A detailed and complete presentation of the qualitative and quantitative study demographics will be provided as a part of the study findings in Chapter 4.

Couples were interviewed jointly and individual children participated in focus group interviews. Participant couples and children were interviewed in private clinical settings in semistructured, intensive, in depth, focused interviews and focus groups. The interviews and focus groups were exploratory [not interrogation] and observational with unrestricted topic coverage and a validating and respectful approach and response by the interviewer (Charmaz, 2006). Interviews and focus groups were held in a counseling agency at scheduled appointment times to provide for uninterrupted and safe information

exchange. The interviews focused on how study participants experienced the process of blending/family formation, relationship development within stepfamilies, precipitating events to change and the events and factors that influence both positive and negative blending outcomes. The following basic questions guided the interviews and focus groups: 1) Would you tell me a little bit about yourself? 2) Can you tell me about your family? 3) What is it like to be part of a blending family? 4) How would you rate your family blending on a scale of 1 to 10? 5) What helps and what hinders your family blending? 6) What things would you change about your family? 7) What advice would you give to a new blending family just getting started? - Top 3 areas that you would want others to know about? Each interview/focus group was conducted in a single session lasting between 45 and 70 minutes. The couple interview guide and the children focus group interview guide are located in Appendices H and I, respectively.

The Phase II quantitative survey instrument was developed from common repetitive themes found in the blending stepfamily literature and the findings of the pilot study, which were refined with input from the qualitative data from Phase I. The survey was developed to gather important demographic information specific to stepfamilies; unique information that was hypothesized to affect the blending process; and to measure two factors from the perspective of blending family members, both parents and children: 1) *importance of the issue* and 2) *frequency of occurrence*. Both were measured on Likert-type 5-point scales. The parent and children surveys are located correspondingly in Appendices J and K.

In Phase II, the parent survey contained 46 questions and the children survey contained 45 questions and the surveys required approximately 15 to 20 minutes for

participants to complete. Foundational to the success of this research was the development of a population specific instrument for use with blending stepfamilies. Previous research has confirmed that replication of instruments developed for use with biologically-based families can be problematic if used with stepfamilies (Kelley, 1992).

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to create a sound interpretation in the qualitative portion of the study, data collection and analysis were conducted hand in hand (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The qualitative data were collected on audio-taped interviews which were then transcribed verbatim at the completion of the interviews. The researcher became “grounded” in the data by hand coding the transcripts line-by-line or sentence-by-sentence, and also reviewing for in vivo codes – special terms or language used by the participants. After establishing a preliminary analytic direction, focused coding continued in order to evaluate, interpret and synthesize larger sections of data according to thematic category (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57).

After hand coding and highlighting thematic categories and subthemes, Atlas TI, Version 16, qualitative software was used to re-code and further analyze the interview and focus group data. Through hand coding, marking up, highlighting, and recoding with Atlas TI, the analysis process moved from description to discovery. While each transcript/dataset represents a unique individual perspective, the aggregate interviews represent a more holistic and integrated view of the blending family process. Finally, after each interview session the researcher recorded perceptions of the interview process and context, personal emotions, and any nonverbal communication and/or emotions expressed by the interviewees (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Additional meaning-making

came from memos and journaling where concepts not initially apparent were uncovered (Richards, 2005). After reviewing the data for discrepancy, inconsistencies or holes, the researcher turned to data checking with the participants to verify the information collected, check and match themes, request critical analysis and invite them back into the process of co-creating meaning from the qualitative study. Data checking was accomplished through phone conversations, email exchange or face-to-face meetings.

At the completion of data collection in the Phase II quantitative segment of the study, all survey data were coded and entered into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 19 data software. First, a correlation analysis was performed to investigate associations between thematic categories. The categories that emerged from the literature and pilot study and that were confirmed in this study include: relational issues, family structure/system, boundaries, managing conflict, commitment, and communication. Interestingly, no new categories surfaced. However, subthemes expanded and a few shifted to different categories finding better fits. A detailed description of the re-emergence of previously identified and defined themes and thematic validation will be provided in the next chapter as a part of the research findings. For Phase II quantitative surveys, standard linear regression analyses were completed to examine the predictive values of thematic categories and their associated attitudinal and behavioral characteristics on blending success. The independent variables, all continuous, included each of the confirmed thematic categories or constructs (relational issues, family structure/system, boundaries, managing conflict, commitment, communication); and the dependent variables were 1) Positive and Happy Marriage, 2) feeling like a family, and 3) children adaptation (continuous). Throughout the collection

and analysis phase, all data collected, including participant personal information, were kept strictly confidential as required by the informed consent agreement.

One of the most important components in qualitative interpretation and meaning making is immersing oneself in the data. As the researcher, I was able to conduct the sessions, journal thoughts and feelings about the interviewing experience and then code the data manually. After completing manual coding, I coded the interviews and focus groups a second time in Atlas TI. After coding the data into the thematic categories, or as categorical constructs, i.e., ways of thinking about the theme, the data were printed out and the coding was refined providing a third view of the data. This created a lengthy immersion in the data, which very important to and facilitative of the interpretation and meaning making phase that followed. The initial data input process in Atlas TI provided an aggregated composite of all couple interviews and children focus groups. After an integrated analysis of parent and children data, the data sets were separated and individual parent and child data analyses were then completed in Atlas TI. During this process, the researcher reviewed the data a fourth time with separate foci on each data set, returning to the interview voice files to listen to participant responses when questions surfaced or a need for clarification and/or a deeper and more complete understanding was needed. It was determined that since the children's voice was new to the literature and the field in general, the separate, children-coded quotations would be printed out categorically, reviewed a fifth time, and significant themes highlighted to gain a greater depth of perspective and understanding of how this new and unique voice was similar as well as different from the parent voice.

As new data was received and evaluated, thematic constructs and subthemes expanded and collapsed; subthemes that were duplicative, singular, or insignificant were eliminated or combined with other similar subthemes. Atlas TI's merging tool was utilized, which facilitated the collapsing and condensing of data that fit together better under one name or a new "blended" subtheme.

Strengths and Limitations

The primary strength of the study methodology is the selection of the mixed methods (MM) design itself. The Phase I qualitative strand captured the lived experience of blending stepfamilies and their perspective on what helps and what hinders the blending process. Qualitative research unveils the faces behind the numbers of quantitative research and allows for more complete, multidimensional interpretation of the results. Additionally, and by design, Phase I informed and refined the quantitative study employed in Phase II of the study. The Phase II quantitative strand estimated the association, importance, frequency and contribution of issues common to blending families. The exploratory and confirmatory nature of the MM design provided both breadth and depth to this research study, creating a more holistic picture. Finally, while the initial, proposed sample size was considered to be a limitation, the resulting sample size (more than double the expected number of parents and children) strengthened the study. Also noteworthy is the fact that various state human service agencies contacted the researcher as the study was closing, requesting information so that the results could be made accessible to those receiving services across the state of Utah. This underscores the need for research on blending stepfamilies and the viability of future research with this population.

While there are many strengths, the study is not without limitations. The research utilized a nonexperimental design without randomization or a control group; consequently, the generalizability of the study results is limited. Also present were a self-selection bias and self-report measures. Participant attrition was also an impediment to the study process and the stepchildren focus groups were most affected. Many children who were targeted and whose parents had expressed interest in having their children participate, either were busy or lost interest at the time focus groups were conducted. To address this concern as it surfaced, an amendment to the study which provided movie tickets as incentives for stepchildren participation was submitted and approved by the IRB. Nevertheless, fewer than expected children participated in the focus groups. A larger group response may have significantly affected focus group results. Due to the personal, research and clinical interest of the researcher, researcher bias must also be considered a limitation to the study, specifically to the qualitative strand. While the issue of maintaining anonymity and confidentiality (not sharing any information outside couple interviews and children focus groups) was addressed with all participants, the researcher cannot guarantee that participants may not disclose information from those interviews. Finally, due to the nature and nonexperimental design of this MM study, any results may not be generalizable to the larger target population.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the study sequentially and chronologically as the research was conducted in two phases according to the mixed methods (MM) research design. In Phase I, the qualitative strand utilized couple interviews and children focus groups to gather data, which were used to inform and refine the development of the quantitative survey. Accordingly, the qualitative results will be presented first, followed by the quantitative survey results and statistical analyses. Much of the data and findings will be reported individually; however, some results will be presented in aggregate and some will be juxtaposed in a comparison view. The qualitative results descriptively and articulately tell the story of the stepfamily blending experience.

Qualitative Analysis

The purpose of the Phase I qualitative strand of the study was to 1) explore the lived experience of blending stepfamilies, 2) identify factors that contribute to positive blending outcomes, 3) identify obstacles that impede successful family formation, and 4) obtain advice from stepfamily “blenders” that they would offer to other stepfamilies preparing to begin the blending process.

First, a brief demographic description of the couples and children who participated in the qualitative phase of this study will be presented, followed by participant self-rating of blending success on a scale of 1 to 10. The general response to the experience of blending two families together will be viewed through participant eyes, followed by various snapshots of both parent and child descriptions of obstacles and challenges. Next, the central lived experience of blending stepfamilies as it pertains to the facilitators and obstacles of the blending process will be viewed through the hexagon of constructs (6 thematic categories) that have organized and shaped the study. Finally, the “3 pieces of advice” offered to other stepfamilies on the front end of the blending process will be presented. The results to this question will be reported with couple and children data in aggregate, with important similarities and differences being noted.

Qualitative Sample

Participants in the qualitative phase of the study included 10 remarried couples, both spouses having brought children to the marriage subsequent to a marriage where their children were born. All were biological children, and there were no adopted children involved in the sample. Seven out of the 10 couples still had children in the home while the remaining 3 couples were older and all their children had left home. Husband and wife individual ages ranged from 32 to 69 years, and the average length of marriage for participant couples was 10.1 years. The 9 stepchildren (3 children in each of 3 focus groups, designated here as the 8-12, 13-17 and 18+ groups) who participated in this part of the qualitative phase ranged in age from 8 to 23 years, with a mean age of 16 years. The total number of children in the participant blending stepfamilies ranged from 4 to 11, with a mean of 5.8 children per family. Couples and children who participated in

the interviews and focus groups were from Salt Lake and Davis counties in the state of Utah. No other demographic data were collected in Phase I.

Scale of 1 to 10

In the interviews all participants were asked to rate the blending performance of their families on a 1 to 10 scale of blending, 1 meaning not blended at all and 10 indicating perfectly blended. The couple blending ratings ranged from 3 to 9, with mean of 7.4; 8 out of 10 couples responded to this question. Even though participants were asked to rate their current blending status, some couples preferred to offer their view of a “recent average,” as they felt their rating depended on the challenges of the day and/or week. Most parents felt, all things considered, that they were fairly successful in blending their two families together. The following two parent comments capture the feeling of the need to put it all into perspective:

Husband: I would say we're certainly not perfect. I would say we're somewhere around an 8 to a 9.

Wife: I was going to say 8 too. I just think sometimes we're hard on ourselves and sometimes we think oh man, we just haven't done a very good job. You know, something will happen. We say well those kids hate each other. We just didn't do a very good job. And sometimes you have to step back and say even in a normal, regular, traditional family everyone doesn't always get along. Kids fight. There is tension. I mean sometimes we're a little hard on ourselves because we wanted it to be perfect and we didn't ever want any stress or any fighting, but that's not normal in any family situation. (Couple Interview 7)

Husband: Nothing is perfect. I'd say 8. (Couple Interview 1)

Children blending ratings were lower than parent's; they ranged from 4 to 9, with a mean of 6.8 and 3 of the 9 participants wanted to give two rankings – one with all the kids and the other excluding the nonparticipatory or more difficult to blend children. The following statements describe participant rationale:

I would say probably a 10 on the siblings but as a whole family probably a 5. I don't think my stepdad is involved really into our family as much as his daughters are.
(Focus Group: 18 +, participant 1)

I have two numbers as well. For the people living at home, I'd say like a 9, like way up there. We just feel like a family, like not like a blended family, just like a family. As far as like the whole family, I'd probably say like a seven, maybe a six because I don't feel like my stepbrothers are my siblings. Maybe my oldest stepbrother, who is closest to my age, because he and I got to be friends and got to know each other, but the other two have always, one of them was out of the house in like juvenile detention for most of the time until he was 18 and then he lived home for like a month and then moved out. But when I did get to know him, I did get along for a while, but I don't get along with him. And the youngest, I have got along with, but he just, he separates himself from the family and he doesn't want to be part of the family. But the kids that aren't living in the house it's lower like a 6, yeah like a 6.
(Focus Group: 18+, participant 2)

Experience of Blending / Typical Day

Participants were asked what a typical day was like. Both parent and children perspectives describe the approach, difficult nature and the rewarding experiences of being involved in blending two families together. While both perspectives share some commonalities, they are very hierarchical and role dependent. The position of a parent at the top of the family hierarchy connotes authority, direction and responsibility in the family system, while children function as underlings who are receive care, sustenance and discipline from the parental executive dyad. The following quotes provide parental views of common blending themes experienced by many, e.g., coordinating and transporting kids back and forth, dealing with different rules and expectations, and reflectively recognizing their need to work at it:

Husband: I think it's a big struggle. It's been a struggle for us just because there are so many personalities...and when you have children coming every other weekend, the dynamics change and it's excruciating because they're different every day.
(Couple Interview 6)

Wife: I think one of the biggest challenges was I, you know, wanted to see my son twice a week and so with working full time I tried to see him twice a week. It was a lot of driving, so I would drive and pick him up and then sometimes his dad would bring him up and take the girls and so I was, it was a lot of driving. And then on the weekends, I would go pick them up and bring them back. (Couple Interview 7)

Husband: We always decided from the very first time that we were first, and our children were second. And I think that's what really helped. In first marriages, people don't say that. I have my children here and you have to come along with them.

Wife: Because when you're single, it's all you have. You take care of your kids. They're your number one priority. You've been with them alone. And then all of a sudden, someone comes in and so it was hard. It was hard to say that, but we did. And his kids were raised a lot different than mine and then you try and put them in the same house together, you know; different rules and different, everything was totally different. It wasn't so different for my kids as far as the way they were raised. It was very different for [stepdad's] kids. So those people who say it should be 50/50, I don't agree. I think it's harder. (Couple Interview 7)

Wife: I think [we] really blended pretty easily for the most part.

Husband: I don't think it's just 'cause of luck. I think it's due more, when you start thinking about it's because we have worked at it. (Couple Interview 10)

While children experience similar blending challenges, their perspectives and views are from the bottom up of the family system. Common experiences of most children in blending stepfamilies include both sides of the issues, e.g., variation day-to-day, reluctant to trust, and the rewarding experience for a child who has been given a “second chance” at a healthy loving parental relationship.

I don't really like it. It's hard for us. (Focus Group: 8-12, participant 1)

It's hard 'cause sometimes you don't get along. (Focus Group: 8-12, participant 2)

It's not been hard for me, I guess. My stepdad is really cool so we get along. (Focus Group: 13-17, participant 2)

I think it's really hard at first. It's hard getting used to being a family. There are fun things about it at first. It was fun having little sisters that I never had before, but it's hard just getting used to living with each other, and I don't know, it's just different, but over time I think it gets better. (Focus Group: 18+, participant 2)

It kind of varies day to day. Some days are really easy, get along with the other siblings. Other days you don't get along at all. Some day they're your best friend. (Focus Group: 18+, participant 1)

For me, at first it was kind of hard because I was like 14 and came from a mom that was I guess psycho in ways. She verbally and physically abused me, so going into a new relationship with that was kind of hard. I didn't know if I could trust her. Some days I didn't feel like she cared, she was just there for my dad and over time, since I lived with my dad we got really close. I found out that she loved me, she cared, she was there for me. She kind of became my mom.... (Focus Group: 18+, participant 3).

Obstacles and Challenges

Nearly all of the significant quotations that follow could be coded into one of the six thematic categories presented in Chapter 3. However, some noteworthy obstacles and challenges stand out and should be noted: For parents, having their children “displaced,” watching power struggles develop; and dealing with finances, ex-spouses and being distant from children, preventing bio-dad from remaining involved in their lives, were all reported to be significant obstacles and challenges.

Wife: His kids were displaced. They didn't know anybody in the neighborhood. We got married over Easter break so it was the middle of April. We let them finish out the school year at their school, and so I was driving them in to Washington Terrace. Before we were married, they liked to be with each other. They liked to go do stuff as a group. After we got married, there has been power struggles. (Couple Interview 8)

Wife: Finances for sure... (have) been and continues to be the hardest 'cause we pay child support, visitation expenses. His ex-wife, like at Thanksgiving and Christmas helps a little bit with transportation, but the rest of the year she really does not and so we have to finance that. We end up paying for hotel rooms. His divorce was not equitable because at the time he had no money to hire an attorney and since then, we've had such tight finances we really. We started to do something with an attorney...eventually it just kind of went by the wayside. But I think finances has hands down been the hardest part of the whole thing.

Husband: I think it's a combination of the finances and for me personally being so far away from my kids. Not being able to be there for plays, sporting events and knowing that I can't because we can't always afford it. (Couple Interview 10)

Not feeling like they are being treated equally or conversely feeling that bio-siblings were treating stepmother poorly were viewed as frequent, difficult challenges both to experience and watch for children involved in blending. Speaking of stepfather's relationship with his biological son, an 11-year-old describes her feelings this way:

He just won't, he'll give all the attention with (stepson) and he'll be all nice and pretty with him and won't on us. Well, it feels like kind of hard...harsh...harsh!
(Focus Group: 8-12, participant 1)

A 23-year-old young man contrasts the difference between himself and a brother in their treatment of their stepmother:

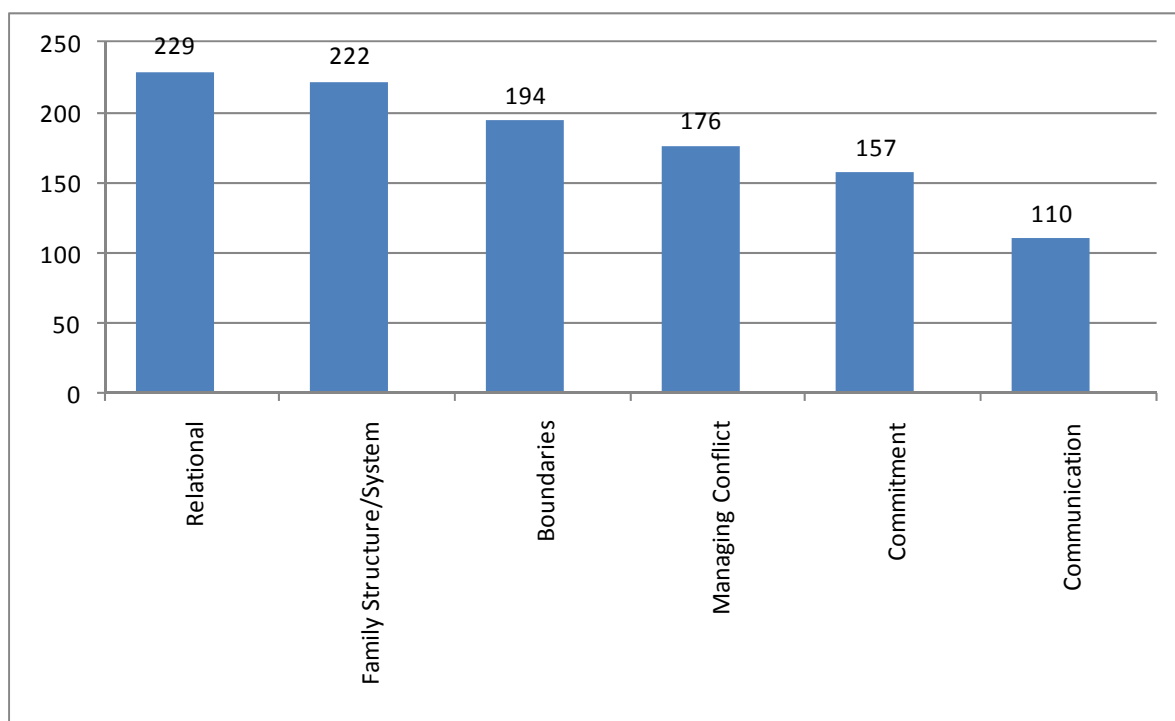
He kind of accepted it that they were married and she was his step mom....a lot of the things that she does like bugs him and he's just like man, I don't know how my dad can do it. Because she's always late to events...family parties or church or games or whatever, she's just always been late and that has kind of affected him. I don't know, like he's nice to her and polite to her, but he doesn't treat her the way that I treat her. I see her as like a mom and treat her like that and he's just kind of disrespectful...like...she's with my dad sort of a thing.
(Focus Group: 18+, participant 3)

Thematic Constructs

In the analysis of the qualitative interviews, the six thematic constructs that emerged in the literature and were emphasized in the pilot study were repeated in this study. In Table 4.1, the number of quotations coded to each of the constructs across the couple interviews and children focus groups are listed in descending order of predominance along with a visual graphic display of a total of nearly 1100 separate thematic notations. There were a grand total of 1337 coded quotations across the entire qualitative study (parent and children), including coded quotations in the categories unique to specific questions in this study. The unique, study-specific categories include: demographic information, scale of 1 to 10, experience of blending, challenges and

Table 4.1: Thematic Categories/Constructs

	229
Family Structure/System	222
Boundaries	194
Managing Conflict	176
Commitment	157
Communication	110
Total	1088



obstacles and three pieces of advice. While quotations from these study-specific questions were coded to categories identified by their names, it is important to note that all coded quotes, excluding the demographic information, could be coded to one or more of the six named constructs, further confirming them as common themes to blending stepfamilies in the pilot study and this dissertation study.

While no new thematic constructs emerged, several new subthemes were created and/or revised, adding new dimensions to existing constructs and broadening and deepening the understanding of the unique experience of blending stepfamilies. The individual thematic constructs are depicted in Tables 4.2 through 4.7 with their respective subthemes listed in descending order of predominance, each with a visual graphic display. New/revised subthemes are noted with an asterisk (*).

Facilitators and Obstacles

The thematic constructs and subthemes can be viewed dichotomously as either facilitators or obstacles to the process of blending stepfamilies. Some of the most exemplary quotations illustrating the six thematic constructs follow and provide emphasis and validation for the selection of these constructs for use with blending stepfamily research. While there are many quotes that descriptively paint the picture of the blending family experience, the selections that follow focus first on participant views of attitudes and behaviors that both facilitate and impede stepfamily blending. Due to the enormity of quotations, not every subtheme can be represented in this study. However, various important quotations that emphasize the groundedness (repetition) and density (connectedness) of each construct to other related subthemes will be provided. It is also important to note that constructs are frequently interrelated.

Table 4.2: Relational Construct

Patience To Change / Acceptance / Non-Nuclear Okay	27
Feeling Like A Family / Unity / Belonging / Peace – Not	25
Spending Time Together	24
Equality / Individualized Treatment	21
Realistic / (Un) Expectations / Lowered	15
Evolving Relationship: Friend, Favorite Relative → Parent	14
Adjustment: + or -	13
Consistency / Inconsistency	10
Empathy	10
Significant (+/-) Event	10
One-On-One Time – Not	9
Ah Ha Moment	9
Forced Bonding / Blending	8
Split Loyalty – “Caught In The Middle”	7
2 nd Chance	5
Modeling +/- Patterns	5
* Teen Troubles	5
* Unconditional Love	5
Flexibility	3
Total	229

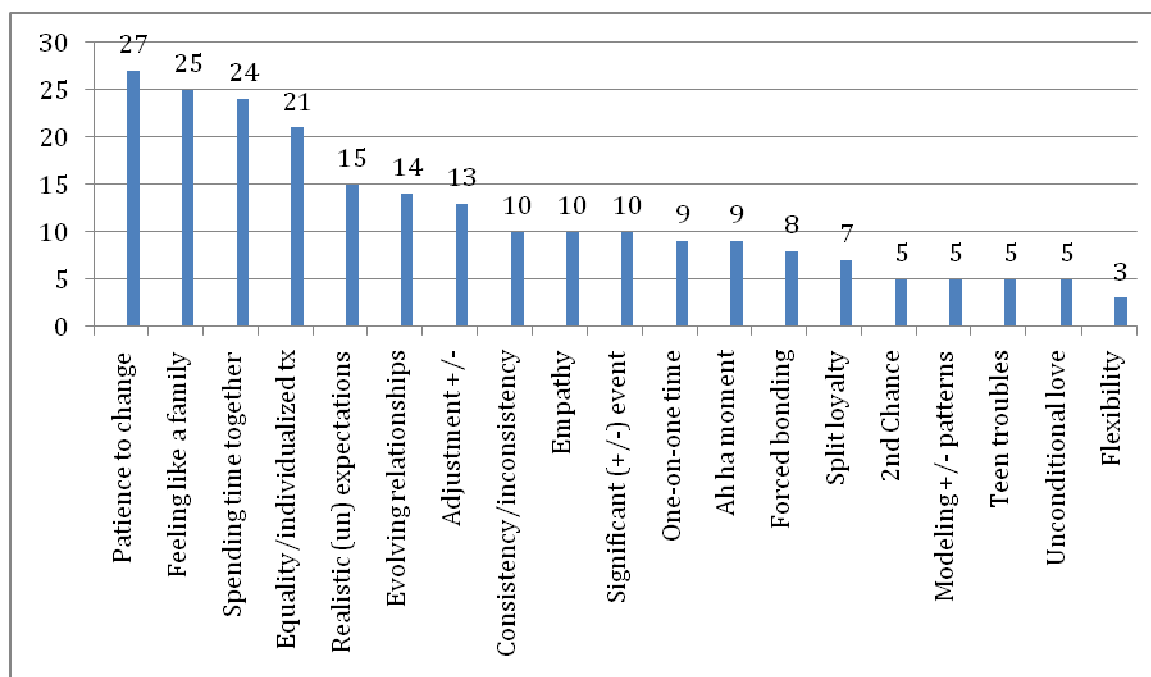


Table 4.3: Family Structure/System Construct

Activities / Traditions / Meals / Religion / Vacations / Photos	69
Illness / Dysfunction / Abuse / Substance Abuse	39
Impact Of Divorce / Remarriage / Blending	24
Work Schedule / Routine / Chores / Allowance – Not	20
Age Similarities / Differences	15
New-Old House Impact	14
* Impact Of Age: Growing Older, Maturing – on Perspective / Behavior	13
Differences: Approach, Upbringing, Gender, etc.	11
* Inclusive Of Broader Family / Exes	9
* Shared Child(ren) + / -	8
Total	222

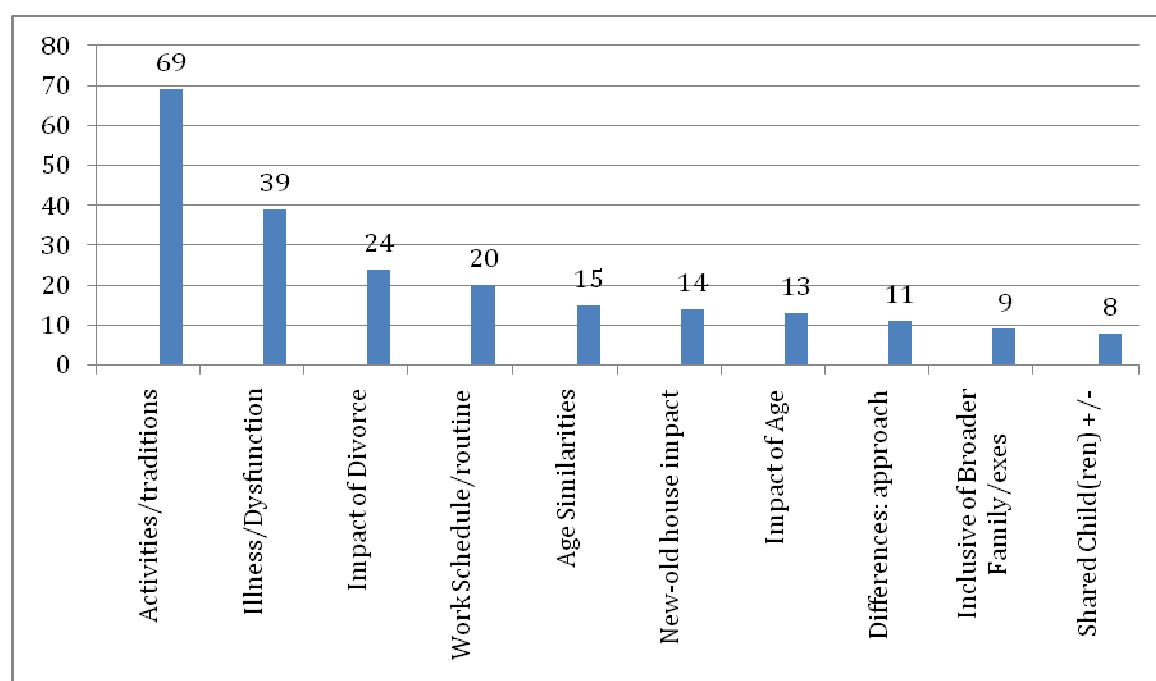


Table 4.4: Boundaries Construct

Impact of Non-Custodial Parent +/-	97
* Setting/Redefining Role Expectations – Parent/Child Hierarchy	31
2 Families, 2 Sets of Rules/Values – Difficulty, Double-Bind, Comparison	24
* Permeable: Back & Forth	9
Wait to Introduce to Kids – Date for a While – Not	8
Extended Family Impact	7
Personal Space	7
Supporting Bioparent / Biochild Ongoing Relationship	5
* Choices & Consequences	4
* Parentified Child	3
* Insulating Kids For “Ex” Conflicts	2
Total	194

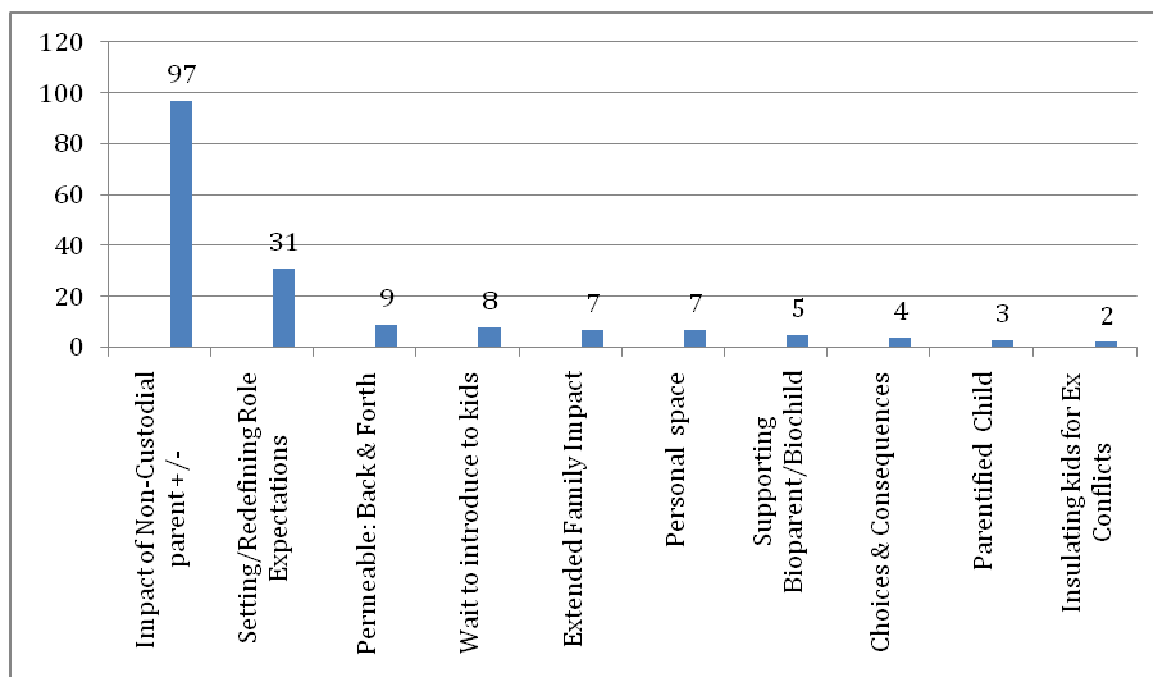


Table 4.5: Managing Conflict Construct

Triangulation / Parent Splitting	29
Stepchild Resistance	26
Discipline from Bioparent / Stepparent / Joint	25
* Being on the Same Page / or Not	22
Finding Middle Ground / Shared Approach / Compromise / Unified Front	19
Defensiveness / Denial / Blaming / Protecting	18
Side-Bar & Debriefing	10
* Avoidance / No Energy	9
* Mutual Enmity / Power Struggle	8
Stigma	4
* Legal / Financial Issues	3
Manipulation	3
Total	176

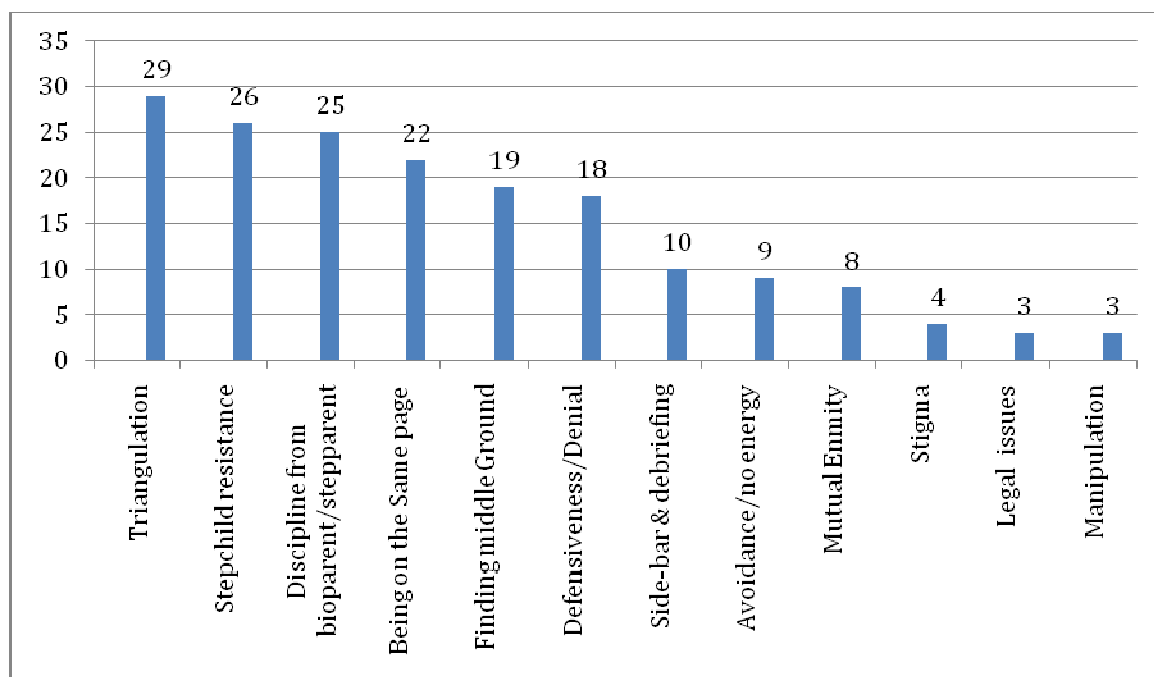


Table 4.6: Commitment Construct

Marital Unity / Disunity	39
Counseling / Mediation	31
Prep / Seeking & Sharing Resources / Wisdom	27
Confident/Evidence of (+) Outcome	18
Marital Satisfaction	12
Put Spouse / Marriage 1 st	9
Building Trust / Trusting / Loyalty - Not	8
Excitement/Anticipation	3
Total	157

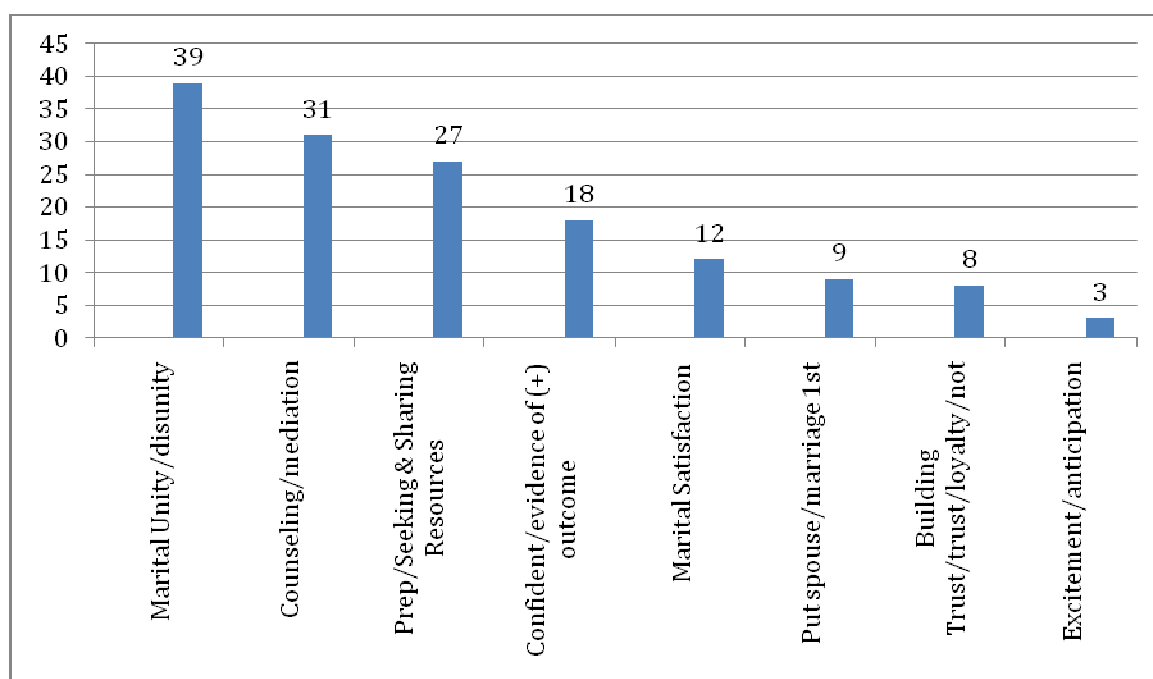
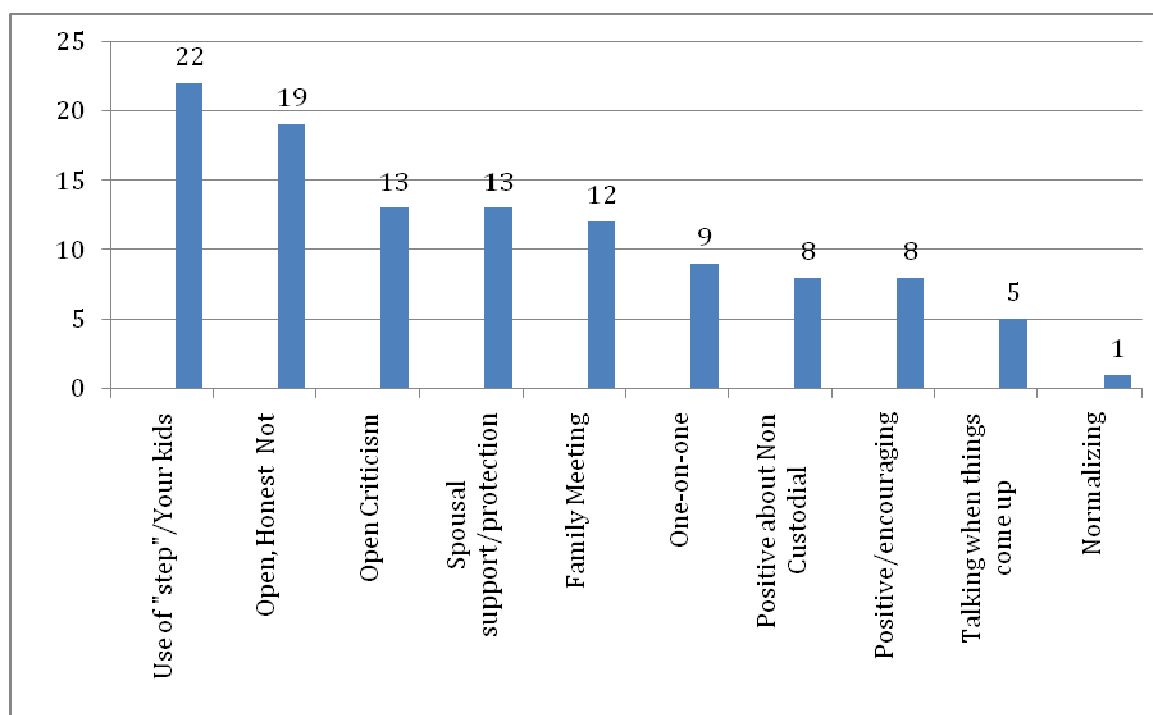


Table 4.7: Communication Construct

Use of “Step” / Your Kids, My Kids – Not	22
Open, Honest, Direct, Respectful – Not	19
* Open Criticism	13
Spousal Support / Protection	13
Family Meeting / Council / Include Kids	12
* One-On-One	9
Positive With & About Non-Custodial Parent / Not Retaliatory	8
Positive / Encouraging / Unity Talk / Humor – Negative	8
* Talking When Things Come Up / Listening	5
Normalizing/Reframing	1
Total	110



Couple Interviews

The six thematic constructs which first emerged in the literature and were confirmed in the pilot study, surfaced again in the 10 couple interviews that were conducted in Phase I of this study. As each construct became visible, subthemes that appeared were reviewed for definition and repetition and then compared individually to help confirm their respective identities and names as they developed.

Relational

There were 229 quotations categorized within 19 subthemes reflecting relational issues. The themes of patience, acceptance and flexibility were present throughout the interviews and especially apparent when participants were asked to give advice to new blending stepfamilies, which will be highlighted later. Replete throughout the comments that follow is the idea that parents need to allow for time and endure some pain before recognizing that calmness and the ability to take a step back are prerequisites for trusting relationships to develop.

Wife: But it is evolving, the last few years. I think in the last two years I have seen a marked improvement in how it feels. Be patient and realize and just trust that they will mature and ...and the relationships that they're having with their stepsiblings will be important to them. (Couple Interview 2)

Husband: Sometimes you're going to have to watch it evolve and go through pain (inaudible). (Couple Interview 3)

Husband: We accepted the fact that you can't be a mom to a kid when you're not really their mom. I am a stepparent; I'm not his mom, I'm not his blood and I'm not emotionally attached like he is to his other two parents and that's okay. (Couple Interview 5)

Coming to an acceptance that a blended family does not have to be a nuclear/biological family to be successful was analogous to coming to the realization that you can't put a square peg in a round hole as described by this dad:

Husband: If you try to mold that nuclear family foundation of emotions and expectations and just bonding, it doesn't work the same and it's not going to work. Unless other parents are out of the picture completely it won't work. So, don't try to put snowshoes on when it's summer. (Couple Interview 5)

Flexibility appeared to be a major link in the family relational chain. One mother emphasized, "Flexibility is huge. You have to have that flexibility, and it took us a long time to figure that out. You have to be flexible and as the kids get older you have to, you know, juggle a little and tweak it and change it a little bit and be willing to do that and not (be) too rigid" (Couple Interview 2).

One couple spoke of feelings of natural affection for each other being helpful, and another couple reflected that time and consistency had brought about a change with their children and made the family "feel different" with the zenith for the one stepmom being when "He started calling me mom" (Couple Interview 2). Another couple with younger children noted that as time went on their "kids definitely seem (to) feel more attached as a family" and their fundamental belief was cemented that "the strongest unit of our family is the kids' unity" (Couple Interview 3). The kids in this family (ages range from 3 to 11) always want to know when the other kids (stepsiblings) are coming home. Mom and Dad stated that all the kids are very connected and express the need to be together; the kids that share time with another parent remark to these parents when they come back, "it's so nice to just be at home."

Spending time together was understood and valued by all families. The fun times of being together as one big family appeared to provide healing for the injuries of

blending and past hurtful experiences. Regardless of opportunities for costly activities, families of all socioeconomic statuses enjoyed just being together and hanging out; some self-declared, successful blenders happily announced “we do everything together.” The perception of value of one-on-one time was also high, yet it was not often practiced in many families, perhaps due to the commotion of blending two sets of children, each child having his or her own agenda of which activities are important and which are not. Time together was considered to be important to build relationships, especially with stepparents, and made kids feel needed and connected as demonstrated in the observation made by this dad:

He [son] feels more protected by [stepmom] and they will go and do things. He will go and run errands with her and be happy to go and likes doing little adventures, going to Wal-Mart for milk. Yeah, and he likes doing those things. It helps him feel, it lets him know he is needed and wanted (Couple Interview 3).

One couple was persistent with a son who initially did not feel comfortable with the new blending family. Bio-dad dad spent a lot of one-on-one time with this son, including a one-on-one mini vacation. He followed up their time together with calls and counseling, and over time they built the relationship and he was able to help his son acclimate to the new family. Most parents talked the talked of equality, but walking the walk is infinitely more challenging when thoughts and expressions of “your kids” and “my kids” erupt. Most parents ostensibly make the effort to provide and maintain equality in the family system, remarking “we made an effort to make everything fair” (Couple Interview 4). Another couple maintained:

If your kids are going to do chores, then my kids are going to do chores. I mean, we've tried to raise them fairly. (Couple Interview 8)

One mother raised the importance of one area of equality that may go unnoticed:

And then balance the pictures in the home. That's kind of a funny thing. Kids count. That probably has saved more grief than you can imagine. (Couple Interview 9)

The unrecognized enormity of front end expectations of a blending family and parents is a natural set up for disappointment. Parents' unspoken expectation is for the new relationship and family to be the perfect toolbox that can easily repair any problems that will be thrown at them and that it will also provide healing for all past relational wounds. The voice of blending experience offers caution:

Wife: Yeah, I think expectations are huge and just facing the reality of it. (Couple Interview 10)

Husband/Wife: Don't expect the family to be a traditional, nuclear family. It won't look the same, but it can still be very good. It can feel very good and not look the same as what you have in your head. Whether you have ever verbalized it or not, you have a picture of what it's supposed to be like and it's not going to be like that, but it can be really good. It took us years to figure out that it was okay to have it look different. (Couple Interview 2)

Wife: Yeah, I think some people have unrealistic expectations and think, you know, as soon as you get married you're just a family and call them dad and call them mom, and it just doesn't happen overnight. (Couple Interview 7)

Husband: Don't expect it to be easy. Setting expectations has been something we've done successfully at times and struggled with at others. (Couple Interview 3)

Wife: Well, what we have learned to do is not expect perfection, and we try to help each kid wherever they are to be better in what they're doing and not be critical of them. (Couple Interview 4)

Wife: And changing your expectations of what you picture as what this family is going to be like. Because I think very naively most people go into this thinking that they're just going to replace their ex. They're going to pop another body right in there and the family is going to look the same, and it isn't the same and it will never look the same. (Couple Interview 2)

Parents said that relationships can't be forced and often evolve from an "aunt role" toward a "full-blown mom role" (Couple Interview 5). One mom expressed her reluctance and resistance to take on a motherly role: "Me trying to fit into the picture as a

mom was like, there's just too many hands in the pot” (Couple Interview 5). These parents reported feeling that it was best to let the child lead the parent-child relational evolution:

...allowing him to kind of express what, define how he wants that relationship and then reciprocating it. From my point of view, it's kind of the same thing that she's [stepmom] watching, wanting to be able to provide for him, kind of that healthier kind of relationship. (Couple Interview 5)

[Stepdaughter] wants more of a friend from [Stepmom]. There are a lot times that she wants to just kind of do the fun stuff with her ...just a laid back relationship with her. I don't know if casual is the right word. (Couple Interview 3)

The adjustment to bringing two family dynamics together was regarded as both a challenge and blessing. Gray hair, high stress, poor academic performance, strained relationships and police involvement were reported as negative blending adjustments. Conversely, others talked about the need to create a peaceful house and supportive environment where kids and their friends wanted to be. One mom triumphantly said of her kid's stepdad, "... he is a lifeline for them, for the first time he seems to be their lifeline” (Couple Interview 2).

While consistency is considered by most to be an important factor in providing stability in any relationship, this relational subtheme was considered by participant parents to be critical in bringing about change. When speaking about the yo-yo effect of kids going back and forth sharing time with noncustodial parents, “You have to be consistent” was the common parental mantra. Modeling consistency was also considered to be important - going to bed at the same time, having a date night, sitting together and showing affection to one another – all were thought to convey marital unity and consistency, two bywords of marital satisfaction. One mom equated consistency with integrity, emphasizing that parents should just do what they say they are going to do.

Finally, this stepdad's statement provides insight into the practical impact of parental consistency, reliability and dependability:

[Stepdaughter] knows that I'm the one that will drive to Rexburg to help her. But she loves her dad and wants her dad, but I think she is figuring out where her bread is buttered basically. (Couple Interview 2)

Empathy was another common relational subtheme. Even when the kids "caused us a lot of headaches at times, we still welcomed them into our home. I liked to be around them. I feel bad for them now when they struggle" (Couple Interview 4). The need to "have empathy for the kids and what the kids are going through and where they're coming from" (Couple Interview 8) was repeated.

Most couples and their blending families had experienced a significant event that provided opportunities for "transformational" changes as individuals, in marriages and in entire families. Having a shared baby, brain tumors, substance abuse/addictive disorders, and religious missions all provided opportunities for intra and interpersonal change: introspection, self-improvement, compassionate service, setting and maintaining healthy relational boundaries and relationship enhancement. The remarriage itself provided the possibility for a fundamental marital dyad change, as well as personal changes for both spouses, often providing a "second chance" for a healthy functional family system and relationships. It was suggested that as the marital relationship improved, the propensity for healthy development in parent-child dyads and children subsystems increased. One mother spoke about the transformational change that had taken place with her second husband of nearly 18 years:

It was just a life changing experience to go from a very miserable horrible marriage in which I had no voice, no checkbook, no power and no support and no recreational activities together to one where I actually have all of those things reversed. I've got support, somebody on my team, someone who actually talks to me, someone who

genuinely wants to be a good person instead of my ex who just wanted to have the image of a good person. So, for me it was like night and day difference, and I was just so much happier. I had a lot of learning to do on the way, such as this is how a marriage works, which he taught me. "This is how," you know, "this is how we talk to together with the kids" because I didn't have a clue. I'd never seen it before. I didn't have a good role model anywhere in my life, anywhere, so I learned a lot. So he was the first truly good person.

See, he comes from a warm, wonderful, cohesive, supportive family. I come from a chaotically disengaged ghastly family and so, you know, his is functional, mine's dysfunctional. For me it's heaven to finally have a good marriage that where there is support and where the blending, for me it is working out. (Couple Interview 1)

Parents described some of the lessons learned through the process of blending as "Ah ha moments." They described these revelatory occasions and also observed of their children that "little by little they started figuring it out" (Couple Interview 2). One dad who had been struggling with the negative influence that his ex-wife was having on his children stated that he had finally come to the conclusion that the very best thing he could do was to provide a stable, loving, consistent environment when his children came to his house. The following comments by parents reflect this "ah ha" experience:

Bio-Dad: One night I was driving around and a thought hit me. I need to let the kids come to me when they're ready ...to protect my relationship with them. It needs to be on their terms, not because I have a legal right to it. And so I let them, I had to let them go with their mom. (Couple Interview 2)

Stepmother: And she...in the last year or two just realized this is the only role I can play. I don't have to be a super mom. I am a stepparent; I'm not his mom, I'm not his blood and I'm not emotionally attached like he is to his other two parents and that's okay. And I think a lot was lifted off her shoulders when she finally decided or figured that out.
(Couple Interview 5)

Parents also recognized that it was important not to force new relationships on their children, as illustrated by the following mom's statement:

I think the most important thing that we did is we did not force anything. We didn't force a single thing. We didn't say, "Hey, we're going to get married and you're

going to like it." We knew what we wanted, but we were very careful not to force anything. (Couple Interview 2)

A common occurrence within a blending family is when one parent is trying to be loyal to the new spouse as well as his or her own biological children. The highly intensified nature of having to split loyalty or be "caught in the middle" is captured by these statements of a biological father and a stepmother:

There was still this tension between my three boys and [stepmother] and even with me because I'm in the middle trying to protect [stepmother's] feelings, and I'm also trying to look after my boys' needs, and then it became a very difficult line to straddle ... (Couple Interview 2)

That causes contention between [stepdad] and I because I feel like he's protecting [stepson] or not treating me as, you know, as the other spouse, the adult. And I kept saying, I would say to him, "You know, I'm not the sister, I'm the wife, you know, so don't do this. Join me and even if you don't agree with me, in front of him we need to agree and then in the back, you know, we can work it out." (Couple Interview 3)

While all couples felt that modeling healthy behaviors and interpersonal interactions was important, some accentuated its importance by providing examples of the ways they "set the tone" for the family relational environment:

Wife: It also helps set the tone for how the children can treat the other parent, well to treat either parent. Because we try to make sure we're talking respectfully to one another and we will joke with each other, but we won't joke in a mean, derogatory manner towards one another, especially in front of the kids and so that they don't have those same reactions and tendencies. We try very hard...to make sure they are not playing off one another with that and just kind of establishing some of those, I guess boundaries. (Couple Interview 5)

Husband: I think that because of our modeling as parents and as companions we have saved at least four out of our five children. I certainly know my two children wouldn't have seen that and probably would not have chosen healthy spouse as mates, and I believe [stepmother] and her children are the same. (Couple Interview 7)

The foundational counsel offered by parents was to love, accept and support your stepchildren unconditionally. "Accept them into your family as if they're your own and

love them as if your own. Bring them into the family...love them and accept them for who they are” (Couple Interview 10). “Yeah, be supportive of their activities and be supportive of their achievements and failures” (Couple Interview 1).

Family Structure and System

According to parent study participants, of all thematic constructs, the number one facilitator of family blending was having family activities and creating traditions that define family time together (69 quotations). Adding in the 24 quotational codings of “Spending Time Together” under the Relational construct, time spent doing things together is validated as the most powerful theme for blending stepfamilies. While holidays for blending families can be miserable due to shared time with other parents and incredibly busy schedules, the way blending stepfamilies said they made holidays work was to fill them with fun and creative traditions. One couple described how they gathered their children together and created a list of everything that every member of the new family liked to do. Then the whole family worked to refine the list into something that everyone was excited to do. Nearly half of the couples interviewed were passionate, some even fanatical, when talking about family activities and creating family traditions. One father emphatically put it this way: “But we did a ton of things to blend our family. We started many, many traditions” (Couple Interview 7). The following list is representative of the creative family blending activities that worked for study participants:

- Holidays
 - General
 - Invitations to all for every holiday – no anger if family members don’t show
 - Invitations to extended family – children’s in-laws

- Thanksgiving
 - Two meals – one at noon and one in the evening, invitations to attend one or both
 - Invitations to all to go to a movie after dinner
- Christmas
 - 1st Saturday – invitations to all to make gingerbread houses – shared provision of the supplies
 - Game night during the holidays
 - Christmas Eve open house – finger foods, treats
 - Two meals – one at noon and one in the evening, invitations to attend one or both
 - Read Luke 2 as family
 - Hannukah parties
- Halloween
 - Throw a party the Friday before where all are invited – married and grandchildren
 - Costume dress up
 - Parade from youngest to oldest
 - Introductions and pictures
 - Awards (\$) for all who dress, bigger prizes for best dressed
- Easter
 - Baskets
 - Certificates
 - Easter egg hunts
- Indoor – rent movies, movie night, watching favorite TV/cable shows together, decorate cookies, game nights
- Outdoor – hiking, camping, fishing, skiing,
- Athletics – soccer, Jr. Jazz basketball, parent coaching
- Vacations – Disneyland, St. George, Cedar City, St. Anthony's, Goblin Valley, Sand Hollow, 4-wheeling trips
- Family dinners – Sundays or another mutually agreed upon day of the week
 - Events to unveil annual vacation - scavenger hunt, Amazing Race
- Family pictures
- Miscellaneous – Lagoon, Fun Dome, bowling, music lessons, Slurpees,
- Family home evening
- Family activity day/night
- Married / out of house kids
 - 3 major activities per year
 - Sign-up sheet at times with food assignments to engage and commit attendance
- Attend church/religious meetings and activities

While family activities and traditions were recommended by all families, the enthusiasm of two families (Couple Interviews 1 and 7) clearly classified them as family

activity zealots. Some of their original ideas follow. All families expressed the need to work hard to make their traditions a consistent reality.

Activities were on Saturday, and we were very, very consistent with those. But if you look back and ask the kids, they would probably tell you that the family activities were probably something that they'll remember doing because we did it, no matter what. That was always, and there were a few times when the kids, you know, had things going on or they had activities and things and we'd say, well, it was always tempting to say, "oh, let's just not do it, we'll do it next time" and so we always had to say no. Even if we have ice cream sundaes at 10:00 at night or even if we go to breakfast at 7:00 in the morning, we have to do it. (Couple Interview 7)

Challenging financial times and having few resources didn't stifle this family's commitment to do family activities; rather, it promoted an environment of "forced creativity:"

So we said we have \$10, and so it forced us to be very creative. We went and got ice blocks and ice blocked down the hill. We would go to a dollar movie. We would go to a museum and then the kids could use that \$10 for a treat. You know, they could maybe get a Slurpee or an ice cream cone. We'd go hiking, sledding, we'd rent a movie. We would, you know, look for coupons. (Couple Interview 7)

Creating fun new family activities, keeping them a secret and surprising everyone injected fun and energy into these events. The "unveiling" of the annual family vacation was an extraordinary surprise for one family, as depicted in the following wife/husband exchange:

Wife: We've done a lot of things over the years, and the kids never know what we're going to do, you know, and I'm really big into secrets, not secrets but surprises. I don't want them to know. I'm always like "you can't tell the kids this." We need to do this, we need to do this, and so it's always, they just never know what to expect. They don't know if they're going to wake up Christmas morning... and they weren't that happy about going out and doing the Amazing Race because it was hard.

Husband: They were mad the morning of, but they were, when it was over, they were like "that was so fun!" It happened to be a big blizzard that Christmas morning. It was horrendous. It was like more windy than with snow and blowing all over and drifts. It was horrible, and yeah halfway through, one of the cars our kids were using, we had two different teams, one of them died.

Wife: They were expecting something big and so last year on Christmas morning we just did a normal Christmas, but two days later we were up in Brigham City for my

mom's 80th birthday party, and it was a normal dinner and as soon as we came out we gathered all of our kids together and said, "okay, you guy's, we're doing a big scavenger hunt." And we told them this is our family activity. You're going to be with us the whole day, so they had to do a picture scavenger hunt from Brigham City all the way into Salt Lake City and back here (home) to figure out where our family vacation would be for the year. Because of course we can't just tell them our family vacation. You know, they work together and get along well, you know. (Couple Interview 7)

Participants reported that coordinating with other non-custodial or shared-custodial parents makes pulling off planned activities a challenge, but parents who claimed success were those who were persistent and negotiated a win/win for everyone involved. Eating meals (holiday, Sunday and "long dinners with lots and lots of talk with real natural food with everybody helping to prepare, helping to clean up, like a big Jewish family" [Couple Interview 1]) was highlighted as an important time for blending stepfamilies. One stepdad, in an attempt to support and form solidarity with his stepsons, grew his hair long with them.

[Stepson] grew his hair long and was getting all sorts of crap from his other family about his long hair and I grew my hair out. I got my hair down to mid back or so, and (another stepson) grew his hair out too ... all three long hair. So to that extent, there was pulling together. (Couple Interview 1)

The families who appeared most committed to being successful in blending were those who not only professed commitment but then followed with actions of being together:

We did everything together. Almost all our activities were family activities: movies or games, cleaning the house together; work... painting a room together, cleaning up the garage together, washing the car together, you know, just about everything. [Stepdad] has this deal about even if we're working together, you put on some music, you have some pizza and you have a good time. Telling jokes. Silly videos. My kids had a hobby of creating silly videos, creating really, really stupid original home movies. (Couple Interview 1)

Some parents were so successful in creating enthusiasm and contagion for family activities and events that they decided to set up a monthly activity for married children and extended family. One couple described it this way:

Wife: We do something every month just with our immediate ... and they ask us all the time "when's our next family activity?" And we have a big family party with my relatives and

Husband: Extended family.

Wife: That's once a month, too, but that's separate, so. They're invited to that of course.

Husband: And the other thing for blending, to add that in, is it's not just her family, my family. My parents come and her parents come, her siblings come. If I had siblings here, they would come. It's we are a family, and in fact, her sibling's family could come as well. Her sister's husband's parents used to come.

Wife: We've just always invited everybody.

Husband: Blending everyone sort of thing. (Couple Interview 7)

While most parents spoke of inviting and involving extended family such as cousins, aunts and uncles, grandmas and grandpas, surprisingly, 3 out of 10 couples with extraordinarily tolerant family dynamics invited and welcomed a variety of people from their ex-spouse's family including ex grandmas and grandpas, aunts, uncles and cousins and even ex-spouses and their spouses.

The tempering and seasoning of age and maturity were evident in older, more experienced blenders. One mom's comments after about 4 ½ years of blending two families:

Somewhere along the line too I've found that it's not all about you. When you can do that, you understand you have effects but it's not all about you, let go of that selfishness. (Couple Interview 9)

A father reflected on the impact of his poor choices in setting priorities with relationships: "I think I lost more in relationships and things as time went on because I had my priorities a little wrong" (Couple Interview 10).

Illness and substance abuse within a family system are challenges for any family. Physical illnesses, which came up without prompting in the interviews, included open heart surgery, back surgery, heart-lung machine, and broken limbs/accidents. Additionally, various incidents of mental illnesses, emotional and addictive disorders were discussed: suicide attempts and self-harm, Depression, Borderline Personality Disorder, Bipolar Disorder (manic-depressive), Anxiety Disorder, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Asperger Syndrome, Personality Disorder – NOS, Somatoform Disorders, substance abuse (alcoholism, meth, opiates, miscellaneous drugs), Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Panic Attack, specific phobias, and psychiatric hospitalizations. In addition to physical, mental and emotional health challenges, dysfunctional behavior exacerbated relational challenges. Biological parent affairs, family members' refusal to take psychiatric medications or go to counseling, and childhood molestation surfaced as significant stressors for blending stepfamilies.

Without exception, couples responded that they were ill-prepared for the extreme difficulty and challenge that would come with divorce, remarriage and blending families. Situational depression was reported, and for one stepmom the anxiety created from dealing with the triangulation between herself, her husband and her stepson required medication for a period of time to calm her down. The struggles at home created adjustment challenges and consequential atypical behaviors for children. Getting into fights at school, throwing temper tantrums and self-victimization were described by couples as difficulties their children had experienced.

Most parents said that “everybody had to work together so we had assignments” (Couple Interview 7). Chores were common for all families, with some using a “chore jar” allowing kids to choose their daily task. Some parents incentivized chore completion with an allowance while others based allowance on chores plus grades. Assignment of chores/jobs provided an opportunity for family members to feel that there were equal expectations, learn the value of work and how to save money, and manage personal finances.

When asked about the impact of age similarities/differences and specifically whether bringing children together of similar ages has a positive impact on blending, “definitely” was the echoed parental response. Kids of similar ages were described as wanting and liking to be together, “best buddies,” and being “tight.” Sharing common ground and interests was framed as a facilitator that assisted kids in creating bonds with others in the family who were walking parallel developmental pathways. Younger children seemed especially open and receptive to having same/similar aged stepsiblings and were especially eager to share bedrooms and even wardrobes.

One of the potential remarriage landmines is moving into a home occupied by one of the remarried spouses. Couples unanimously warned against this option, though some who elected to move into their new spouse’s home defended this choice, stating that they had done this at the urging of an attorney or trusted clergy. The logic at the time of the decision was that an existing home would be more convenient and less disruptive to half of the family because they would not have to be uprooted and would continue to live in a familiar neighborhood with established friends, attend the same schools and have known community supports. Even when attempts were made to “make it our home” by painting

and replacing carpet, parents reported that it did not end up being “neutral” as was hoped. A common response to stepparent from a resistant stepchild native to the home included, “This is my house. I can do what I want.” Defiant attitudes from resident children were often coupled with feelings of displacement as they frequently were forced to “make room” for the new family members. The occurrence of two-way resentment when incoming children expressed anger and frustration for having to move to the “other” family’s home is described by this mom:

We moved into my house. I wouldn't recommend it to be honest. His kids felt like it was my house. You know what I mean? And my kids felt like their space had been taken away because it had, you know, our two oldest boys had never shared a bedroom. They had their own bedrooms at their own houses. When we got married, they were forced to share a bedroom. And that created some conflicts and a little bit of resentment. They handled it well, but I noticed a big difference when we moved here (new home for this family). Everybody kind of relaxed and thought "oh, okay, this is our house." (Couple Interview 8)

While the mother above expressed relief after moving to a “neutral” home, mild warnings followed by emphatic counsel are offered to anyone considering moving into the existing home of one of the spouses in a blending stepfamily:

It took some time to prove that that was not a wise decision. (Couple Interview 4)

Get into a neutral place. (Couple Interview 2)

If I ever hear anyone say "oh it's okay. I'm just going to live in his house" or "we're just going to live in my house," I tell everyone "Do not do it. Do not do it." We had to at first. It was the worst year of my entire life. That was hell. I hated living there. I hated getting up and seeing everything, you know, sleeping in their bedroom. I would never in a million years ever. We should have gone and rented a trailer. I mean, I look back at that and I didn't know, but I would tell anyone "I don't care if you have to go live in a trailer. I don't care if you have to go rent an apartment. Do not ever, ever." (Couple Interview 7)

The approach to a family system is affected by upbringing and gender, among other things. The stereotypical soft nurturing approach of mothers was apparent in

general throughout the interviews. As expected, most fathers followed a more forceful, boundary-oriented, black and white, choices and consequences approach. One father expressed the bottom line in his parenting philosophy, “I think the kids should just conform” (Couple Interview 8). Challenging societal stereotypes, some stepmothers and stepfathers seemed to have negotiated a role reversal where mom was the more strict and stern disciplinarian and dad was softer and played a mediator/negotiator role. The age-old axiom that opposites attract was apparent in many interviews. Whether the topic was conflict tolerance or forced blending, some parents resided near opposite poles and had to work hard to find middle ground. Upbringing clearly had an impact on one couple where mom’s family of origin operated from a “conflict is healthy” paradigm, while she portrayed dad as operating from a “Disneyland fairytale” frame. Ultimately, couples recognized that the marriage is made up of “two people who had very different ways (and) very different ideas of how things should be” (Couple Interview 10).

Shared children had an extraordinary impact on the family structure/system. Three out of 10 couples had produced a shared child together. The impact was positive for all couples who shared this experience, and the shared child appeared to act as glue to bind the couple and family together through the turbulent times of family blending. The following quotation expresses one couple’s experience and perspective of the dramatic positive effect the birth of their shared daughter has had on dad, how it grounded, involved and transformed him, and how it “spilled over” into how he treats the rest of the family.

Wife: You know, this has been such a hard year for us in a lot of ways... I mean, we've got her. I think we get along better than we ever did. Not to say that there are not still problems now and then 'cause of course there are, but I mean in general I feel like we're at a better place than we were. I think it's made it better. I think

having her has been really good for him (stepdad). He has been, I feel like he has been more involved in what goes on at home now than he ever has been. I see him more as a father now than before. I don't know, there was part of my head that saw my kids a little bit as mine even though I didn't. I don't know how to explain it, but just sort of they're not mine like I own them but mine like they're mine to deal with in terms of whatever has got to be done and whatever...just because he wasn't around a lot. And so, I think that it's different now. When he is home, I feel like he's home, you know. I don't know how to explain it better than that, but I just feel like he acts more in a fatherly role, I guess.

Husband: It's, yeah having her has totally changed me and I did not expect it. I had a lot of apprehension about having a baby, having another kid. I'm 42 and I'll be close to retirement when she's getting ready to leave the house. That's all a big commitment, and I didn't know if I was ready for that. I had a lot of reservations about it, but I'll tell you what, I am so happy. I have enjoyed having her and it has, it's grounded me. I think I'm definitely more patient. I am more involved in what goes on here.

Wife: He's just been really a doting daddy when it comes to her, and I think it's just sort of spilled over. And he has a tendency like when he's stressed out and upset. He has a tendency to like raise his voice and since she has been here, partly because we want to keep her sleeping, but I mean, it's made him, I think a little calmer in that regard. (Couple Interview 10)

Boundaries

Setting and maintaining boundaries is critical to creating a healthy family system and is a particular challenge when bringing two different family dynamics together. The influence and impact of ex-spouses often generates a tug-of-war between the custodial and non-custodial households. This single subtheme accounts for the most frequently reported obstacle to successful stepfamily blending. Highly emotionally charged, this emerged nearly 100 times (97) across 10 couple interviews, more than any other subtheme. When two biological parents split up, a natural unconscious and/or conscious response is a power struggle. Magnified and accelerated by the biological tie to their progeny, many parents feel an intense need to get the most time, influence and loyalty from their children...and the battle begins. Parents reported feelings of competition with, and comparison to, the other parents and parenting system. The competition led to

ulterior motives to “get back” or “one up” the other parent and frequently was damaging to the children, who ended up being pawns in the custodial/non-custodial parental chess game.

Behavior by ex-spouses was portrayed as ranging from wholly enmeshed and over-involved to absent/infrequent contact (living in another city, state, country), abandoning, having animosity and contempt. Noncustodial parents were also described as constantly stirring the pot, having inappropriate relationships (affairs, revolving boyfriends), fluctuating expectations and double-standards; and being dramatic, volatile, unpredictable, boundary pushing, embarrassing, enabling, alcoholic and hypocritical. Calling the police and involvement in legal issues (e.g., custody battles, filing restraining orders, trumped up abuse and harassment charges) were all reported as common for non-custodial parents. Often it appeared that the motivation was to create conflict in order to shift attention away from healthy, happy occasions in which the children were involved. One mom related this story of manipulation and sabotage on the couple’s wedding day:

Our wedding day the police were called. We were actually married in the temple so we had a reception in our back yard, my back yard at the time, and everything was arranged with his children. She [bio-mom] called up a half-hour into the reception and said the kids aren't coming because they were mad at each other and it was her time to have them, why did we plan a wedding on her weekend. So anyway, he called the police to let the children come to the wedding and that staged the whole marriage. (Couple Interview 9)

On occasions where both parents were present to support a child, apparent jealousy surfaced and interactions with both parents in public settings seemed to heighten comparisons and the feeling of competition. Children were often put in the middle and forced to split loyalty between the custodial and non-custodial parent. At times children were coached to behave negatively to assist the perpetrating parent in achieving the

desired goal. In the scenario that follows, a stepmother describes her confused and torn stepson's biologically loyal response:

He [dad] was trying to mediate something between his ex and him to change something. [Son] was out of control in the house. My kids are holed up upstairs in a bedroom with the door locked because he [dad's son] was shrieking and he was banging, he was just out of control. I had basically hidden the knives in the house, you know, and I called my stepbrother and he came up, the police officer, and he went down there and spent a while talking to [dad's son]. He [police officer] has always been good with the kids and he basically came up and said [stepmom], you need to let him go live with his mom. He said this is all being orchestrated. He said, "I'm only doing what she told me to do. If I did this, I would get to come back and live with her." And [police officer] is saying, "This kind of stuff can put you in detention." He said, "No it can't. She [bio-mom] said she would get me out. They can't hold me if she doesn't agree." At that point they tried to negotiate something where [dad's son] would go back. Legally everything shows that [bio-dad] has custody, but the boys basically all are back up with their mom. Then our family life settled down. (Couple Interview 2)

At times noncustodial parents said inappropriate things that hurt the feelings of their own children as well as the other parents.

So my kids were in kitchen. [Stepdad] was in there. I [bio-mom] was in there. My ex was in there and he said, "Well you know, if [stepfather] wants to adopt the kids, that's fine too." And I know it was just because he wanted to get out of child support and my daughter said, "Dad! How could say that?" Then he just kind of laughed. (Couple Interview 2)

One of the things she [noncustodial parent] did, she insisted that they call their stepdad "Dad." So whenever they were talking to me they were saying "well my dad" and then they'd catch themselves "well, my dad, [stepdad's name]" (inaudible) and it was awkward and you know I tried not to let it get to me, but every once in a while I'd get frustrated and I'd say, "No, I'm your dad here," you know, "he's [stepfather's name]." (Couple Interview 2)

A bio-dad expressed his frustration with his ex-wife's insistence that her brand new husband "write my kids a letter of how much he loved them. And three months later, he was gone. And so what did that show my kids?" (Couple Interview 7)

Recognizing the need for setting appropriate boundaries with children appeared to be a challenge for some parents. Noncustodial parents addressed issues that custodial parents

deemed to be “adult issues,” as demonstrated in the following quotation by a custodial bio-mom:

Well, there was a lot of negative talk and my son actually was angry with me for a time because I wouldn't talk about it. I just said, you know, these are adult problems, adult issues and you guys are kids...you're young and I don't want to burden you with these kinds of problems. He [son] heard so much negative from my ex-husband yet I would never say, I wouldn't even defend myself; I wouldn't even talk about it. I just didn't feel he should have to deal with those kinds of issues. You know, what are the reasons you got a divorce? What happened? What good is that going to do a kid? (Couple Interview 7)

Though much antipathy and acrimony existed between ex-spouses, healthy relationships were reported. Some parents told of amicable relationships with ex-spouses where the children were put first and the ideal of cordial interactions was valued and practiced. Two illustrations follow:

And then with my ex-husband, we had agreed early on that whatever is best for the children and so they were allowed to come home on weekends even though they were his and they were able to go to their scouting. They're both Eagle Scouts. (Couple Interview 10)

The first two or three years of our marriage, we had a lot of issues with his ex-wife but she's mellowed out and I think we're all kind of learning to not step on each other's toes too, both them and us, so I think that's been good. Their [bio-mom's kids] dad lives in Maryland. He and I have always had a reasonably good relationship for divorced people. You know, there'll be something that will come up now and then and if I have something I need to talk to him about that I'm not happy about or that he's not happy about, we just talk about it when they're not around, but I mean in general he and I get along fine, and we send each other pictures if something has happened while the kids are visiting. (Couple Interview 1)

One mom respected the feeling that any mother might have of being threatened by her children's stepmother as the kid's “other mom.” Another mom saw the ongoing competition as a common occurrence and expectation declaring, “The enmity continues” (Couple Interview 1). Finally, couples offered warnings of natural animosity with exes and some suggestions on how to deal with it:

Wife: The ex-spouses are going to not like you very much. Just be prepared. His ex-wife hates me.

Husband: Just to go ahead and shoot the exes and we'll be out of prison in 6 or 7 years.

(Couple Interview 8)

Husband: The crazy thing is I wish it was better, I really do. I would much rather have it be a friendly relationship and I don't know, it's unfortunate that there's for some reason there is some animosity there on her side, but it has and I don't know, hasn't reared its ugly head for quite a while now.

Wife: Well, I think a lot of that too. His ex-wife and I usually are the ones that do the communicating. (Couple Interview 10)

Setting and defining roles and expectations were validated as a boundary subtheme in this study and are extremely important for blending stepfamilies. Parents struggle with if, when, and how much older siblings should be responsible for newer younger siblings, and bio-kids feel resentment for being “displaced” in their roles before the stepparent “intruder” comes into the picture. A stepfather remarked that he had to execute role displacement by repeatedly firing his stepson from being the “man of the family” and disciplining his younger brother. This stepmother’s statement reflects her inability to see what her role should be and where her place is in the new family system: “Me trying to fit into the picture as a mom was like, there's just too many hands in the pot” (Couple Interview 5). One couple with younger children (ages 3 to 11) worked to define conversational boundaries with their oldest (age 11) child who had been parentified in the other household and also with another child who had high anxiety and excessive worries. When any of their children began to listen in and started interjecting into their conversations, the parents pursued their stated goal to help their 11-year-old return to her childhood and separate adult from child conversations; they told the

children, “This isn't something you need to worry about. This is for us to worry about” (Couple Interview 3).

Another communication boundary challenge described by participant parents is for blending children to learn that some information about the family stays in that home, and that telling what is going on in the other home can create opposing parental questioning of family standards and protocol and ultimately a toxic triangulation. One family talked about how the new family dynamic had “turned everything they knew upside down” and for their two boys how “It swapped their roles.” Their conversation about helping their sons develop and define new roles follows:

Husband: We talked to them...we said, hey, you know, this is where you get to do something new, something you have never had the opportunity before. You wanted a younger brother.

Wife: And you wanted an older brother.

Husband: And you have one now. What does that mean? What do you get to do? I talked to them about kind of what they wanted to do in that new role, so when they were put in that position they could kind of, they already kind of thought about it a little bit.

Wife: You're going to have to share. You're brothers now.

Husband: Figure it out. You are now going to have a younger brother that ... may want to do things differently. You never had to deal with that. Now you get to learn...to be the one that shows them... different things or you have an older brother...

Wife: You could be the younger brother. Yeah, now you have older kids that you have to share it with or you're not the only child in this family anymore.

(Couple Interview 3)

In the realignment of family roles and expectations, it was imperative for parents to redefine family. Redefining roles and boundaries was important to do as parents before attempting the process with children: “She and I have to talk about it and then have a family meeting and talk about what the expectations are” (Couple Interview 10). Couples had to negotiate when, where and in what types of circumstances kids should be

included, and how to better parent and discipline rather than trying to be a friend. For one couple, they “tried to do it a different way.”

Well, in many cases we didn't blend the rules. Her rules were better rules. We chose the better rules, and I guess in some cases there are some things that I did that [stepmom] would say "okay, you know, we'll do that." But it wasn't because...I raised better children. My children were not. They were kind of out of control at the time and they weren't going on to be real good citizens and I realized that and so I said, "let's do it this way. Your kids are great. Let's do it that way". And in the end, four out of our five children are doing really well, and the one who didn't participate is having a hard time. (Couple Interview 7)

Contrary to a mother having many answers to healthy parenting and family life, one mother applauded the inherent ability of her husband to teach her how to be on each other's side, not “instant enemies,” problem solve, and “how to be a good human being” (Couple Interview 1). According to this mom, the most important thing stepdad did for her was to re-establish proper parent-child hierarchy by teaching her sons proper and respectful treatment of their mother.

All couples who felt they had been successful in the blending process said that, “redefining our family made a big difference” (Couple Interview 2). Yet the following statement by one struggling stepmother punctuates the challenge of role establishment in blending families: “The most difficult thing that I've had to figure out is where I am in the slice of the pie” (Couple Interview 5).

Waiting to introduce someone a parent is dating and the idea of remarriage are topics that come up almost automatically when conversing with blending couples. Many couples say that they dated for about a year before marrying and one couple claimed to have dated “two or three times a week for two solid years” (Couple Interview 1). The following quotation explains the motivation to wait to introduce a prospective stepparent:

We were very careful with our relationship, particularly when it came to our children and protecting them, really until we understood where our relationship was going to go, which also contributed to the length of the courtship. We didn't even introduce the kids to the idea that we were dating for a couple of months. We talked about friends, but we didn't talk to them about dating each other until it had been at least two months. (Couple Interview 3)

Living between two houses creates the challenge of living with two families and having two sets of rules, which often results in a difficult double-bind comparison for children and families alike. This dynamic can be both a normal challenge and a breeding ground for triangulation. When parents of each house have a different set of values, rules and expectations, children, especially teens, learn to play both sides against each other. One couple who lived close to their children's other parents told the story of their son who was attempting to "work the system" by asking parents at both houses to give him a meal schedule so he could compare and choose which house he wanted to eat at that night based on what they were having for dinner. A 17-year-old boy in one family is described by parents as transient and nomadic as he splits time between his two homes in an effort to avoid responsibility and confrontation for any wrongdoing. Juxtaposing most custodial/noncustodial households, one family frequently has a more relaxed approach with lots of freedom, while comparatively the other family is more rigid and strict in its expectations. One boundaries-oriented mom described her children's father: "He was always Disneyland dad and gave them everything. He would never say no, and he would always enable the kids. This is why I've got a real big thing against enabling" (Couple Interview 1).

This dichotomy can be difficult for kids and creates an unhealthy double-standard. Dad's children traditionally come to stay with him and the stepfamily every other weekend, in a part-time neighborhood and community without their established friends.

Parents watching and living this experience with their children were strong advocates against splitting:

I'm a believer that in many instances the child is better off being allowed to have one home with one environment and ... still have open access to the other home. But don't split them between two places. They don't fit in anywhere. They don't fit in the neighborhoods, in the wards, in the school. I mean, they don't belong anywhere. They are caught in the middle and ... they don't have any of that stable place. If you want the child to grow up and be well adjusted, it's really hard to do that going back and forth. (Couple Interview 7)

While no real definitive solution was offered, the general belief is that “it's rare ... that they're allowed to be a part of both homes and both relationships” (Couple Interview 2). A few parents voiced their fundamental goal to create a healthy, stable, secure and loving home environment where the children will want to be when it's their choice.

One couple felt strongly that it was important to support the ongoing biological parent-child relationship. There is a propensity on the part of some stepparents to work harder to build the relationship with their stepchildren while taking their biological children for granted, perhaps feeling they already know, love and accept them as parents. These parents stressed the importance of promoting and cultivating the biological parent-child relationship and insisted that they “always try and find that time to make sure that is still evolving and growing so they are still comfortable and seeing that, especially for [dad's two biological kids] that they're not forgotten” (Couple Interview 3). Other frequent boundary issues familiar to blending families included: respecting each other's personal space, establishing and being consistent with house rules, providing choices and allowing natural consequences to take place, insulating children from conflicts with ex-spouses, and the impact of extended family (grandparent support and counseling).

Managing Conflict

The way couples and families handle conflict often makes or breaks the marriage and family. Triangulation or parent splitting is one of the greatest challenges to successfully managing conflicts. This splitting is common in any family household with children, but with biological and stepparent involvement, emotions heat up and conflict is magnified. Rebuttals such as, “If ‘your kids’ acted more like ‘my kids,’ we wouldn’t have this problem,” can be a common occurrence in the blending stepfamily conflict management dynamic. This topic almost automatically created tension in interviews and became a springboard for discussions about power struggles, double standards, mixed messages, dividing and conquering, boundaries and equality.

Biological parents voiced the struggle between protecting their spouse’s feelings and the marital relationship and looking out for the needs of their biological children. While awareness of triangulation and its impact existed, some couples seemed powerless to prevent it, yet elated to have overcome it:

Wife: We're not being divided and having that whole triangle thing going crazy on us because that's, triangulation was huge.

Husband: That was a big issue. They would try and pit me against her.

Wife: I was the evil stepmother, truly, which was horrifying to me...devastating to me. (Couple Interview 2)

She was a stepparent and he would either run to me or run to his mom and it made it very difficult on her to get those expectations she was trying to follow through with. (Couple Interview 5)

If there was ever a confrontation, [bio-dad], in the past he would put himself between [bio-son] and I [stepmom] and do the buffering, you know, and kind of...why can't you guys just talk? Why can't you just work it out? Why can't you guys just get along? And then, you know, of course you see that the kid sees this and if they read into it at all that it's in their favor then they're going to milk that the next time and the next time and the next time which further builds a barrier between the parents. (Couple Interview 5)

The “protective” parent frequently gets caught in the vortex of the unhealthy triangle – “caught in the middle” and “being hit by the crossfire” (Couple Interview 5). This dad honestly felt that “I’m buffering him from her, I’m protecting him from her, yet all I’m trying to do is bring light to a negative situation.” An unlikely triangulation did occur with one couple that appeared to be a *no-win situation* for the husband: “I was in the middle of my ex and my new wife and it was one of those things” (Couple Interview 9).

Answers to the challenge of dealing with triangulation came through the painful process of trial and error in blending stepfamilies:

It's always been we talk about it in the bedroom before we get with the kids and eliminate triangulation. (Couple Interview 1)

And I don't think he realized at that point that sometimes that's how you've got to build a relationship is to let us work it out ourselves instead of being the protector. (Couple Interview 5)

Ultimately, whether couples struggled to deal positively with triangulation or whether they felt they were successful, everyone echoed the uncompromising mantra, “Always present a unified front to the children.”

Stepchild resistance serves to exacerbate triangulation. Resistant stepchildren were described as defiant, angry, oppositional and accusatory. These kids were willing to throw a fit to gain power and attention or both; one young boy dumped orange juice down his stepmother’s back to show his resistance and was banished to a small bedroom under the stairs in the basement for his actions. Stepchildren who were struggling with acceptance of the new family paradigm typically were not interested in blending; learning anything new, particularly if the stepparent was involved; nor willing to comply with some of the basic family expectations such as cleaning their bedroom, doing household

chores, obeying house rules (curfew) or even cleaning up after themselves. The quotations below are parent descriptions of the frustration and anger that motivate resistant stepchildren:

Defiant young men who “you're not my mom, you can't tell me to do” that and “you have blankety-blank screwed up my father's life,” and they were more flowery language than that. (Couple Interview 4)

We crashed their family and we're the ones who moved in and took dad away from the rest of the girls. (Couple Interview 6)

Whether to discipline jointly or exclusively your own children can be a controversial topic among experienced stepfamilies. While most endorse disciplining your own biological children, many blending stepparents learn to be flexible and modify disciplinary plans with time and experience. The following couple takes an idealistic approach and after 4 ½ years of marriage have found that this works for them:

Wife: We both discipline. We think of them all as ours.

Husband: Yeah, we talked about that before we got married and I tried to, I always did my best to make it clear to her that, even before we got married, I consider her kids our kids. They're all our kids. And I think as long as we keep that in mind, there isn't that issue. (Couple Interview 10)

Other parents expressed support for biological parenting:

Father: One of the things that we discovered in this is that when it comes to discipline it works better from the bio parent.

Mother: No matter how you frame it, it doesn't come across well with the step. (Couple Interview 2)

I've noticed that really works the best is to really let the natural parent be the main disciplinarian of that child. (Couple Interview 8)

One couple with younger children (ages 3 to 11) stated that when their children get into disagreements and come to them to solve them, they will throw it back at them: “Figure it out” (Couple Interview 3). One dad felt very strongly that parenting his older teenager was his responsibility because, “He’s my kid.” Stepparents can be reluctant to

assume a disciplinary role when trying to blend two families together and win the hearts and minds of stepchildren:

When he came home with an F on his report card and I got mad at him, then there was "I don't have to listen to you" and he stormed off. So, you know, as a stepparent you walk a fine line on disciplining kids that are not yours, even if they live in your house. But with his two oldest, I have to be really, really careful what tone of voice I use, what I say and how I handle it or they totally freak out. So most of the time, even if it's little things I make him do it. I say "you need to deal with this; you need to go talk to them about that." His twins, I don't really discipline his twins very much. (Couple Interview 8)

Most couples learned through trial and error that it takes time, patience and trust to find a balance that works and that it is not always black and white:

Father: We learned the hard way because for a long time I was letting (stepmom) discipline, and I think that was a mistake. I think it would have worked better if I had been the one putting the foot down.

Mother: But when I'm home with the kids all the time you kind of have to have this weird balance with it. (Couple Interview 2)

Well, this may not have been the right way to do it, but he disciplined his kids, I disciplined my kids. And as time went on, over the years, then we became a little bit more comfortable with him, you know, being able to talk to my kids or discipline or vice versa, but in the beginning, we just thought it was best. You know, we had probably a couple of trial and error periods where we just didn't work very well and so we just decided, you know, you just discipline. We would just talk about it and try and decide how to handle the situation and most of the time he would talk to his kids and I would talk to mine. Sometimes it seemed a little divided that way, but his kids would accept it and take it a lot better coming from him and my kids would accept it and take it a lot better coming from me. (Couple Interview 7)

Taking the feedback of some of his children seriously, one father revised his perspective on blending family discipline to one of parents presenting a unified front in order to convey not only marital unity but also feeling like "a family unit:"

... that was our discipline issues. We would talk to the children individually. Hindsight's 20/20, but I think the kids kind of felt like we were separated. Today we've had conversations about that and [bio-son]; they didn't feel like we were together on it. We probably should have had both of us in the room communicating with a single child. Not so much a family thing but one person. [Bio-son] has mentioned that because we weren't both together, we didn't seem like a family unit.

So we should have done it together. It would have been more of a unified front. I think it would have been better, but you know, you learn as you go along.
(Couple Interview 7)

When discussing discipline in general, one couple stated that it was important to figure out “who is going to handle the discipline. It needs to be worked out. I think ... the kids have to understand this is my companion and there needs to be respect” (Couple Interview 2). Being on the same page was echoed anytime the topics of discipline and communication came up. Emphasizing this parenting tenet, another couple declared, “We're making sure that they see that we're not going to be played one against the other” (Couple Interview 3). One mother talked about having to acclimate to a new way of joint disciplining, as her previous husband “let me do whatever I wanted. I had absolute control. If I said this is how we're going to do it, he'd say yes dear and that's how it happened” (Couple Interview 8). Two of the couples had constant disagreements throughout their interviews, particularly pronounced around the topic of discipline. These couples automatically polarized in defensive, opposing views of the other as being too rigid or too laidback, too harsh or just enabling, which created dissention, discord and dissonance. This exchange highlights biological partiality and the resultant opposition:

Wife: I think (husband)'s really easy on his kids. I don't, you know.

Husband: I think (wife) is really easy on her kids.

Being on the same page seemed to be more of a matter of “getting on the same page” than magically ending up there by happenstance. Pre-family meetings, discussions, parental side-bars and debriefings to work out differences and blend the disciplinary approach were regarded as keys to finding middle ground, compromising and presenting a unified front. Couples repeatedly asserted, “The most important and no matter what, we have to be a unified front” (Couple Interview 7) and explained that a

“unified front is exactly that. It's supporting each other” (Couple Interview 5). One stepmom emphasized that it was especially important that “in front of him [stepson] we need to agree and then in the back, you know, we can work it out” (Couple Interview 5). Another stepmother described her approach: “And I said, ‘Oh, that sounds like a lot of fun, but let me talk to Dad.’ It's always, you know, I've got to talk to dad first” (Couple Interview 8). Finally, wise counsel is offered by this father: “You've got to somehow figure out how to meet in the middle and be okay with it” (Couple Interview 5). The following couple dialogue provides perhaps the most comprehensive insight to this emotional and potentially volatile topic:

Husband: I think it's finding the middle ground and compromise ... finding a shared approach.

Wife: I think it's accepting that you are going to have to compromise with someone else.

Husband: Yeah. Well not even compromise but you're going to have to give in.

Wife: Yes. That sounds good.

Husband: Not always, just usually. Yeah, it's understanding when to say, all right, you understand the situation better. You know what to do in this situation better than I do.

So understanding when to defer and sometimes it's getting out of your own way.

Wife: That's good. That's like getting over your pride.

Husband: Yeah. Just that there have been a couple of times that we've disagreed on the approach to take concerning something going on with the kids, and we had something going on with [dad's bio-son] and I thought we should be going one way and [stepmom] told me to trust her on what she was sensing and what she was picking up on. And even though I had gone through it with him before, it was getting out of my way, just say, you know, she picked up on something I didn't or I missed and so let's, yeah let's go that way. Let's do that. It comes back to the forcing again. Don't. Sometimes you're going to have to watch it evolve and go through pain together. (Couple Interview 3)

Defensiveness, denial, blaming and protecting are sisters to oppositionality when the battle is waged between bloodlines. One father struggling with his troubled biological teen pled his case: “After a parent hears so much negativity, they just want to sometimes hear something positive. You're coming with all this negativity, I've got to

give you something positive so that you know and hopefully balance that out. Well, it comes out as protection” (Couple Interview 5).

While conflict avoidance can be unintentional, dealing with the conflict of blending two families together can become overwhelming and debilitating: “I just, I do not react well to conflict, so when conflict comes I shut down. I don't want anything to do with it. I don't like the arguing. I don't like the yelling and the screaming” (Couple Interview 6). Other times parents just run out of energy:

“I haven't changed my mind about what I will and won't put up with. I just sometimes don't have the energy.” (Couple Interview 5)

“...we would talk about things and when it got bad I'd really walk away.” (Couple Interview 10)

In the end, this father expressed regrets about not having engaged more in some of the difficult conflictual issues:

I mean, I look back now and I, I don't know... I always just ignored more than I should have. I should have been more in tune in more things. I lost out on a lot of the important stuff, I think, in life, so. I probably didn't handle conflicts too well. Actually I kind of ran from them possibly. (Couple Interview 10)

Holding parental side-bars and debriefings were recognized as some of the most effective ways to create unity and common ground in managing conflict or any other blending family issue as evidenced in the following statements:

When we had issues, we really tried very hard to keep them private, you know, go in the other room. But there have been times when she and I have to talk about it and then have a family meeting and talk about what the expectations are. Yeah, and sometimes it doesn't even start out that way. Sometimes it starts out as he sees things one way, I see things a different way and so then we go talk about it and decide how we're handling it. (Couple Interview 10)

Wife: Well sometimes it was a pow-wow of you and I alone together in the bedroom first of how are we going to handle this.

Husband: How about talking. Talking about so how do we handle this before either one of us go back and then we debrief, too, afterwards. Well, how do you think that

went? Well, that was a disaster, you know. That's one thing we're good at. We're good at talking a lot. We talk a whole bunch.

Wife: Number one on the list. (Couple Interview 1)

A final subtheme that surfaced relative to managing conflict was the societal stigma these families deal with coming from “broken homes” of divorce and attempting to create a reconstituted/restructured whole out of “used parts.” While most couples did not acknowledge actively dealing with stepfamily stigma on a daily basis, they did comment on the heartache of divorce for parents and especially for children.

Commitment

While many themes represent commitment to a new marriage and blending two families, according to study couples marital unity is the cornerstone of commitment. One couple made this the preamble to their family constitution: “My alliance is going to be with my partner” (Couple Interview 2). This couple stated that they “felt like if we didn't stand united we wouldn't be strong enough.” Without unity, dealing with troubled teens can magnify the intensity of the emotions attached to issues. Following is a quotation of the stepmother of a troubled teen when she felt she finally received support from her husband and that they were unified in their approach to their son:

But because he supported me, it has made us; I mean it has given me that like, “you know what, wow! This feels good.” I love him and he knows I love him, but to have him support me like actually builds your relationship. It's so huge for that stepparent to feel that, “Hey, I'm behind you.” (Couple Interview 5)

The disunity displayed in two of the couple interviews created a feeling of discomfort and animosity that lowered their energy; in most interviews, however, the feeling was one of synergy. The exchange below accentuates the value one couple

(considered by many in their community to be successful family blenders, having worked at it for 10 years) places on unity:

Wife: We do everything together.

Husband: We are perfect in many, many ways for each other. I don't mean, perfect people, perfect for each other.

Husband: And she knows, the strengths she has are my weaknesses and my weaknesses are her strengths.

Wife: Everything we do though.

Husband: I said that as the same thing, so in other words, I have no strengths and she has all the strengths. (Couple Interview 7)

In reflecting on what helped this father achieve unity, he offers this counsel: "So I've learned I had to back up a little bit you know and give and take" (Couple Interview 7). The unifying lens for parents blending their families perhaps can be encapsulated by this advice from Couple Interview 10: "They're all our kids."

The result of successful blending and marital unity is marital satisfaction. Couples spoke of walking and/or biking regularly together and having a regular date night. Though it is challenging for blending couples to juggle visitation with kids, they reported seeing and feeling the benefits:

Carving that time out is tricky. It's very tricky, but we do see a direct result when that happens because we're able to deal with everything that gets thrown at us. (Couple Interview 2)

Time spent together as a couple not only improved marital satisfaction but also provided a direct benefit to the blending family according to the couples in this study.

The following exchange between a husband and wife married nearly four years emphasizes the importance of marital unity and feeling loved and supported:

Husband: Before I married [wife], which is the best thing in my life.

Wife: Well, thank you.

Husband: She has just brought a whole new different meaning to life so it's, my relationship with [wife] and my feelings for her ... so that makes a difference too.

Wife: He loves me.

A wife reported that her marriage had been life changing and made a night and day difference, not only for her, but for the entire family. She described herself as being “just so much happier” having a supportive role model who was the “first truly good person” in her life (Couple Interview 1).

Putting your spouse first is another mantra for marital satisfaction. One father was direct and succinct with his children: “My alliance is going to be with my partner” (Couple Interview 2). Another was more dramatic in his allegiance, stating that he would never allow his spouse, the kid’s stepmom, “to be tossed under the bus. Here's a news flash. I love you dearly, but if I have to choose between my spouse and you, you're the one that's going” (Couple Interview 7). This same couple, married for 10 years, told of their priority to sit together at movies, vacations or other events even when the children were young and it was difficult. The kids are older now and some are married, and they tell their parents they are glad that they did those things and set a good example of putting your spouse first.

Another demonstration of Commitment is seeking and receiving counseling to assist in the difficulties of blending. Most couples stated that they had used counselors either before or during the marriage. Counseling was sought for specific members of the family, the parents and the entire family. One couple reported that they initially began getting couples counseling and ended up bringing their children in periodically to address issues that were surfacing in the merging family. Blending couples acknowledged receiving help with blending, abandonment, divorce, self-esteem, situational anxiety and depression, custodial and financial advice and adjustment. One incident of using a mediator was reported to help one blending family work through a difficult situation.

The meeting was declared a success, with the mediator setting ground rules of acceptable behavior at the outset, maintaining control and guiding the family to resolution. Fair to great improvement was confirmed as a result of counseling. Several counseling outcome examples follow:

So before I met him, I had been going to some counseling and getting ideas, and we had included all of my children in with that, and so that helped us as a family learn how to communicate better and listen to each other and understand.
(Couple Interview 4)

Through counseling I found a lot of things that I was not doing, you know, that I was unintentionally doing ... avoidance of conflict. Realizing how that gets twisted into a completely different realm and causes distance between us and some of those things being brought to my attention were helpful. (Couple Interview 5)

But he's finally went and got some counseling and stuff and over the last probably three months I have seen the biggest changes in both of them. I've just seen such a huge difference, that's why I brought it up when you said counseling. So I think counseling has helped because I think that's where he's probably got his release from now. (Couple Interview 9)

This same father said, "So I think counseling is important to a point," accentuating the fact that great ideas for change and improvement are only as good as individual, couple and family implementation. Even though one wife went to counseling, the husband refused to attend after going two times. However, with few exceptions, the counseling experiences were regarded as providing benefit to blending stepfamilies.

In addition to counseling and therapy, couples sought out and used other resources to assist them. Parents communicated that they had read countless books; talked to other blenders and parents; and took marriage seminars, Love and Logic parenting classes and a stepfamily education class from Utah State University (USU). The couple who attended the USU class explained that the sessions were well organized and the curriculum covered a variety of topics including communication and empathy –

seeing the process from the children's point of view. They indicated that they had been married 2 years by the time they took the class and recommended that couples take it before marrying as it would be much more beneficial. One mother used every resource she could find and both partners felt that the information guided their blending journey and validated the things they were learning from their own experience:

Husband: She has worked very hard and she is the one that read the stuff and said, "You know what, we're doing this wrong. We need to redefine our family and let's stop expecting this to be a traditional nuclear family. It's not going to be that, but it can be a good thing anyway." So I credit [wife] for that.

Wife: When I read your stuff the other day in that meeting, I'm just like going, man, that is totally what has happened with us in the last couple of years that's made a difference because it totally, I mean it was like this huge thing when I read that because it just validated everything we'd been finding out. (Couple Interview 2)

Couples recounted having family talks to prepare the children for the changes that would be taking place, discuss expectations and create a forum where the family could work things out. With proper planning and approach, these preparatory family talks generated excitement and anticipation about the new things that would be happening in the family, including becoming a larger group of brothers and sisters.

One of the important challenges for blending families to overcome, even before the remarriage, is to successfully cultivate a family attitude of confidence and belief of a positive and bright future together. One mom felt that with teenagers "it's a roll of the dice" (Couple Interview 5). In the midst of blending, especially in the early months and years, it's difficult to "just try to step back and see the big picture and keep doing what you're doing regardless of the results, just believing..." (Couple Interview 2). This same mother speaks in the following quotation of finally having a picture with the whole family:

I'm so happy that we had one. [Son]'s fiancé was there. It was before the wedding. Before all the boys left on their missions and stuff and I don't know, it was just, I look at that and I feel great comfort that all of that pain and anguish for years trying to blend this family, maybe it isn't perfect but it's still good. (Couple Interview 2)

One couple described the best compliment parents of a blending family can get:

Even though it's a blended family and we wish they would never get a divorce, they always come back and say, "We want to do this with our kids. We want to raise our family..." That's the best compliment we can get. (Couple Interview 7).

Trust is critical to healthy, happy, stable relationships, especially for spouses and children reeling from broken trust, which is often a precursor to divorce. The following two quotes illustrate how broken trust infected current relationships and how that time was able to heal the emotional wounds for this couple:

But, you know, where we had both been divorced before, I think there was that trust issues on each of our parts. Yeah, they were justified. His ex and mine, yeah made it hard for us to trust each other even after we were married. Now it's I can go up to him and talk to him now easier. Like if I have concerns or problems or if I'm mad about something, it is easier for me to say something now, whereas four years ago I was scared to death to talk to him about anything. (Couple Interview 8)

Due to loyalty to a biological parent and being coached to perform untrustworthy acts, children sometimes push the limits of the child-parent relationship and require correction and education, as illustrated in the following scenario:

[Stepson] promptly went downstairs, got a cell phone and texted (bio-mom) and told her that "oh you've got to change the code word. [Stepmom] knows it." And so he knew what he was doing. He understood that he was spying on me, spying on the family and feeding information back. (Couple Interview 8)

Over time these parents were able to build a healthy trust with their children/stepchildren and within the family by being dependable and consistent, even though the children maintained a fierce loyalty to their biological mother:

They're out in the mission field now. If they need something, they ask us. We're the ones that wrote them letters in the MTC, and they didn't get anything from their

mom. We're the ones that made sure they had what they needed. They are still very devoted to their mom. (Couple Interview 2)

Communication

Communication underlies all other blending stepfamily constructs. Nothing is quite as personal as a name, and when a parent's surname changes, it often results in a name change and/or label for the entire immediate family. While "stepfamily" is the standard by which blending families are referred to in modern society, it is clear from the literature and confirmed in this study that blending families do not care for the "step" moniker. This father's black and white framing of the use of the term "step" typifies the attitude of many stepfamilies in this study:

There are no steps and you either, if the kids are there, you're either all a family or you're not. (Couple Interview 6)

This father grew up in a blended family home and had a positive experience and credits, at least in part, the non-use of step: "And nobody was a 'step' anything" (Couple Interview 6). However, in his current blending family, he paints the term "step" as a stick used to beat someone when their behavior is not acceptable and emotions are heightened. One couple defined their basic strategies in their use of "step" in their family:

Wife: I will every once in a while say it, not to each other when we're conversing with a third party; we'll sometimes say it, but we don't ever say it with each other.

Husband: Right. Inside our family we don't ever use it referring to another.

Wife: We'll say "go talk to your brothers and sisters."

Husband: They call her [stepmom's given name] and so I refer to her the same. And the boys call me [stepdad's given name]. And [stepmom] refers to me in that manner. When they're all [children] together we'll say, go talk to your mom, you know, the whole group, listen to your mom or listen to your dad.
(Couple Interview 3)

From this example, which echoes the responses of other couples, it becomes evident that, when speaking with a third party, using a title or the term “step” is often helpful for distinction purposes. One study family had a complex family structure with half brothers and sisters in addition to stepsiblings. Regardless of the biological and or legal structure, what is important is how the family chooses to approach their own labels, and more importantly, how they think of themselves. Following the comfort level of the children has worked for this couple:

She was at 13, 14 years old trying to figure out her world ... and so in the beginning our blending, a lot has to do with the perception of the children and what they want it to feel like for them. (Couple Interview 6)

The exchanges between the two couples that follow, who have 14 combined children (7 in each family) ranging in ages from 3 to 26, provide an overview of how different families work through the process of determining what to call the father/stepfather of the home:

Wife: Two of his kids call me mom. Two of his kids don't and that's fine too. [They] Just [call me by my given name] and that's fine. I'm not their mom. I don't try to pretend that I am, so. My boys all call him dad. I can't tell you why though. They're very loyal to their [bio] dad and they love him and they're very attached to him and I never... You can kind of tell what dad they're talking about in context of the conversation. If they're saying, "Oh my dad helped me with homework" or "My dad helped me with my scouting," then it's this dad [stepdad]. If it's, "Oh, I sat at my dad's house and watched TV," it's the other dad. And it wasn't anything that we had talked to the kids about. I never said, "Call him dad." I never said, "Don't call him dad." I've never, I let them pretty much decide on their own. (Couple Interview 2)

Husband: They pretty well started that before we were married.

Wife: Yeah. And I think it was easy for them to pick it up where they were always with his kids and his kids called him dad. I just think it was a very natural thing, and then I did talk to my oldest son about it once after we had been married a while. It was actually after we moved here, about calling [stepdad] "dad" so I asked him how he felt about it or something, and he said, "Yeah, Mom. I know how much [stepdad] does for me. That's why I call him dad." I said, "Okay." And then recently our youngest who is 8 was, he mentioned feeling uncomfortable about calling [stepdad] "dad" and I was like, well that's really weird you have always been calling him "dad" since you were three years old. And I just kind of asked him. I said, "Well, why do

you think you can't call him dad?" and he said, "Well, 'cause he's not really my dad." No you're right, he's not, but he's the dad of this house. And he's like, "Oh, okay." So a couple of days later he came out of his bedroom and (stepdad) was sitting here on the couch and he said, "Oh, hi Dad," and [stepdad] says "Hi," and [stepson] looks at me and says, "Oh, I can call him dad." Yeah. So I'm not sure what that was all about. (Couple Interview 7)

Another couple describes how they sorted out the stepdad/dad quandary:

As far as the mom and dad thing, these guys [two biological daughters of the mom speaking], like they have a stepmother who they call by her first name. His kids, the boys call me by my first name. His youngest one calls me mom when she's around but I address myself as [given name] when I sign e-mails and stuff 'cause I don't want to upset her mom, you know, so but we didn't really tell them what to call each other. Like him, [stepdaughter] calls him Papa. That was kind of a nickname we made up instead of trying to replace dad. We just call him Papa, so that kind of stuff, but that's about it. We didn't really make any hard fast things. When we divorced we had talked about it and neither one of us [mom and ex-husband] really wanted them calling someone else Mom and Dad and so that's just sort of how we worked around that. (Couple Interview 10)

Due to the fact that in a traditional stepfather family, a stepfather “steps” into the role of father for a biological mother’s family, he becomes the primary target of the “step” symbol. Most families use the given name of the stepfather, some use “Papa,” and others create nicknames. There is impact beyond the stepfather in the new family system. From the parent perspective, children struggle as they get older with their comfort in using the word “step” when referring to family members. For extended family such as grandmas and grandpas, using the title “step” seemed nonexistent. The closer the discussion and relatedness of the issues to immediate family and bloodlines, the more important it appears for individuals to know what is proper and comfortable for everyone in the family. Perhaps what underscores parent motivation to avoid the use of “step” is that doing so provides an implicit measure of success. Being referred to by others, especially family members, without the use of the title “Step” provides the inference that

one is a biological parent equivalent and therefore a successful blender. Both tacit and overt examples follow:

Husband: [Stepson 1], I don't know that he has ever called you mom.

Wife: [Stepson 2] did.

Husband: The oldest one [stepson 2] had a little bit.

Wife: In all his letters he refers to me as mom now. (Couple Interview 2)

Husband: I never asked them to call me dad and the things that people have trouble with.

Wife: But when you introduce them you always say my son, [given name stepson 1], my son, [given name stepson 2], which I took notice of right away, "Oh, he claims them as his children!"

Interviewer: And how did that feel?

Wife: Good....really good.

Husband: And it was purposeful. I wanted them to feel I thought of them that way, which I did. I think one of the things that doesn't get considered is that, and having a stepchild, and we always look at the negative stuff, but when the kid is acting up it's my kid acting up. When the kid gets the prize, it's my kid that got the prize. You get the ownership. (Couple Interview 1)

Open, honest communication was the stated goal for stepfamilies. Couples said that it was important for family members to "be open to hear," able to express their feelings and what they were "struggling with;" they also felt that issues got "resolved" and "taken care of" "because of direct dialogue and talking" (Couple Interview 4). Open and honest communication was stressed by this couple in approaching the delicate issue of having someone new join the family:

Wife: Our approach was a little bit different. We introduced the idea. We were very concerned about their welfare. For my kids, I kept a pretty open dialogue with their dad about what was happening. I think the kids didn't see that I was hiding anything, and so I think that was a healthy thing for my kids. If they felt secure with what was happening because their dad probably seemed a little more secure with what was happening.

Husband: I think more it was the openness for the kids. We weren't trying to hide anything. There wasn't anything sneaky. We weren't doing this to hurt their other parent.

Wife: I never sad to [stepson], don't tell your dad, you know, you don't want to hurt me, don't tell your dad that this is what we're going to do. [Stepson] never saw me

say, you know, never lie to his dad about what was going on or you know and we were very open.

Husband: Well you even said to them at different times that when they asked, yeah, this may be hard for your other parent. Well, there was some concern from [stepson] that his dad was being replaced. And both of us talked to him about that wasn't what I was coming in to do. I wasn't coming to replace his biological father. I wasn't coming in to replace his dad. But I was going to be [his mom's] husband and that we were starting our new family and that kind of approach of just openness. I wasn't trying to remove things that were already secure with. That helped.
(Couple Interview 3)

After working for 10 years to build the relationship, this stepmom revels in the level of communication she and her stepson have achieved: "He has been more open with his feelings about me and his love for me than he ever did" (Couple Interview 2). Two couples displayed open criticism for one another with oppositional, belittling, and hurtful dialogue throughout the interview. One of these couples had a mixed approach on every topic and seemed unwilling and/or unable to find middle ground. Near the end of the interview after trading insults, this couple acknowledged that their behavior "was not good for the kids" (Couple Interview 6).

Couples advised that an important component of communication was for spouses to support and protect each other. "Talking positively about each other too and not allowing them [kids] to be disrespectful of the other parent" (Couple Interview 3) was important for this couple. This mom felt both supported and protected by her husband in the following two exchanges with her stepson (first) and biological son (second):

He [dad] took [dad's bio-son] downstairs to his bedroom and they had a little talk. I don't know what was said. I never asked. All I know is after that [mom's stepson] treated me a lot better.

[Stepdad] gets after him and says, "Hey, I don't like how you're talking to your mom. Change your tone of voice," he's okay with that. It doesn't bother him that [stepdad] got after him to change his tone of voice. (Couple Interview 7)

Parents also felt that their blending families benefit from family meetings and councils as well as one-on-one time. One blending family had a meeting early on to decide on family holidays, traditions, dinners and activities to co-create their blended family plan for having “good family experiences” and “fun together” (Couple Interview 2). In Couple Interview 3 above, a family meeting provided the forum to hold an open and honest discussion about stepdad joining the family. Making children part of the solution-seeking process, setting boundaries and modeling respectful communication are highlighted as important to this couple:

And it's including the kids in the communication. We try and let them see how our communication can be very respectful, for the most part, but trying to set that tone as well when we talk to each other and talking about when we talk about certain things, letting them know when they are going to be included and when they're not. If it's something that we're going to make a decision on, we'll let them know what happens. (Couple Interview 3)

Parents talked about gathering the children together to disseminate information, calendar events and activities, make chore assignments, discuss family problems and model the family hierarchical structure. Though most families used both family and one-on-one meetings, some clearly preferred one or the other, with one couple being split on what each of them felt was the best approach. Three couples stated that rather than having a planned meeting or discussion, they just dealt with issues when they came up. The following family felt that monthly one-on-one discussions were effective for checking in with each child, giving allowance and teaching financial responsibility:

Husband: Another thing we do is have one-on-one. We try to do it every month with the kids, one-on-one. We'll sit down with them and have like a, we do give them allowance instead of, well; when [stepmom] was single, she used to buy her boys whatever they want. We couldn't do that anymore and so we tried to teach them some...

Wife: Financial responsibility.

Husband: Bingo. Financial responsibility and so we'd give them allowance, which like a dollar per their age, you know, so the youngest gets \$8.00 up to \$10.00, so all the older kids get \$10.00 a month. The younger ones get however old they are. (Couple Interview 7)

One of the significant challenges for a parent of a blending family is to maintain positive speech about the ex-spouse and parent who is no longer part of the family. Parents listed a variety of ways they worked to create and maintain positive communication with and about ex-spouses: communicating about changes with the children and family and texting to communicate dates, times, events, transportation of children and to keep tabs on a volatile triangulating teen. Texting (and some emailing) evolved for many of these parents to become a way to communicate in a more civil way as it removed emotions and made information exchange more black and white. One couple offered the following maxim: “Never speak ill about the ex-spouses in front of the kids” (Couple Interview 10). Providing positive, encouraging and validating communication in general was recommended as a way of promoting healthy relationship and family development.

Children Focus Groups

Though the thematic constructs that emerged for the children are the same as for the parents, the children subthemes were condensed and somewhat unique for each thematic arena. The blending issues are similar but perhaps not as complex as they are for parents.

Relational

A variety of subthemes illustrate the Relational construct for children in blending stepfamilies. Feeling like you belong (or not) in your family and extended family is experienced this way for one teen:

I honestly just don't feel part of that family. I don't feel, it's like I don't feel welcome. I don't know, it's just, 'cause I'm not an active LDS member I guess and that whole entire family is...it's a huge deal to them.
(Focus Group: 13-17, participant 1)

Hinting of the need for acceptance and two-way responsibility, another teen suggests:

I think maybe just pretty much the more that your stepparents feel like your real parents, the better things are going to go. I mean, it's like 'cause that's what they're trying to do honestly. (Focus Group: 13-17, participant 2)

Expectations and trust played a role in how accepting children were of their parent's marriage and the idea of blending two families; however, it can be difficult to let go of an old, familiar paradigm, especially one involving a family:

I trusted my dad that he knew what he was doing and so I was excited to have a new family. It was hard, but I was excited to have a new family, so I think other than that, there were realistic expectations. Like everybody knew it was going to take time and it wasn't going to just be easy and it was harder for my sister because she's, I feel like still now she's hung up on wishing that our old family would be back together and that our parents would get back together, so she still struggles with it.
(Focus Group: 18+, participant 2)

Looking back, this transitioning teen sees the value of having a healthy parental figure in his life and as he prepares for marriage himself:

She didn't expect that much from me. But now since I've gotten to know her and she is kind of a mother figure, I expect her to be that mother figure in my life. I don't know if she sees those expectations, but, you know, like I don't call her mom, but she's that mom figure in my life. I go to her for advice now.... like planning this wedding. I see her as like my mom and want her to be, I guess my mom figure that I guess I need right now. (Focus Group: 18+, participant 2)

An evolving relationship between stepchildren and stepparents where initially children feel like the stepparent is a friend or favorite aunt/uncle was considered helpful by some couples. Adjustment takes time, and teens who were older and those who had been involved in their blending family the longest seemed to have more patience and made more reflective observations. The feeling of being forced to bond/ blend is a common phenomenon which one young woman described this way:

Sometimes I felt like we were....my dad and step mom got married really fast...like a month later, so it was really hard for some of my siblings to take it in. Like my sister honestly thought my dad had just gone crazy. It's like she really thought he'd lost his mind ... I felt like some of it was being a little bit forced.
(Focus Group: 18+, participant 2)

Children often felt a split loyalty being “caught in the middle” between the custodial and noncustodial parents. Some typical teen troubles were exacerbated by the frequent parental and relational landscape changes.

I tried my best to make everyone happy as in seeing me. I have to do a lot to go out to my mom's house and come back to my dad and go back to my mom's....kind of make time equal. (Focus Group: 13-17, participant 1)

One-on-one time together and conversations were associated with feelings of love and support. This comment comes from a 23-year-old about his stepmother:

Most of the time I communicate with her late at night. It's like at 11:00 p.m. and I'll come home and we'll just start talking about stuff. Most of the time my dad's just kind of tired, and he'll go to bed and that's usually when we communicate. We'll have conversations like this ... I want you to be in my life for the wedding and, you know, she said, "No, I don't want to be there because I'm not your mom," you know. And so I told her, I was like, "Well, we want you there. I feel like you're my mom. I want you to be there standing next to me" and stuff, and she agreed.
(Focus Group: 18+, participant 3)

One of the advantages of a positive outcome of blending two families together is that it can provide a second chance for a nurturing, loving relationship for a child who may not have had that before. This young man came from a physically and emotionally

abusive relationship with his bio-mom, whom he hasn't spoken to in years: [Speaking of his stepmom], "I see her as like a mom and treat her like that (Focus Group: 18+, participant 3)."

Family Structure and System

The most frequently expressed areas that support healthy development of the Family Structure and System were doing activities together and creating new family traditions. Eating meals, attending church, and going on vacations together were all part of a common theme. A range of family activities were reported by children: eating dinner together in the evening; taking turns cooking (learning how to cook); nature hikes, canoeing, and camping (in camp trailer, Goblin Valley, Maine); going fishing, golfing or to the movies; renting movies (Blockbuster, "budget,"); going out to eat (Five Guys Burgers); playing X-Box, video games, chess and checkers together; spending holidays together (exchanging presents); Sunday dinners; Sundays at Grandma's house; and going to church. Vacationing was a perennial favorite: Disneyland, Star Valley, Dallas, Texas, Pennsylvania, Memphis (Utah Football game), and skiing (condo at Solitude). The value of vacationing in bringing families together was succinctly articulated by this child:

I think vacations were a big one with bringing the kids together and also my step siblings closer to my dad. (Focus Group: 18+, participant 2)

Another factor that influenced the Family Structure and System was the presence of mental, emotional, and physical illnesses and substance abuse/addictive disorders. (Since the impact of illness/addiction on blending stepfamilies is an area of special interest for the researcher, this topic is explored and addressed in the quantitative study survey.) The struggle of one family is expressed below by this young adult:

We have a lot of mental illness in the family and once you've been hurt, you don't trust again, so it's hard to have patience to believe that those people are going to change, so I think that's made it harder for our family.

(Focus Group: 18+, participant 2)

It was always hard to get close to my step mom. She struggled with a mental illness and so she would do her own thing so lots of time it made me feel like we weren't unified, like she always had to be separate from the family, which sucked because you know like I didn't feel close to her, but I still felt like me and the other kids and my dad were all growing closer even though, you know, my stepmom wasn't there, part of the family wasn't there. (Focus Group: 18+, participant 2)

The latent effects of divorce and remarriage, the impact of parent work schedules and age similarities and differences of the children all affected family routine and structure. With the pervasive economic challenges of these times, it was not uncommon for stepfathers to have more than one job or to have returned to school to continue their education in order to support their families. This created less time together and less opportunity to communicate and interact to promote family bonding. Having children of similar ages and/or mom and dad having a child together created common interests and activities and this was believed to make coming together as a family easier.

Boundaries

Setting and maintaining healthy boundaries is a challenge for all families and is particularly unique difficulty for stepfamilies. Becoming a new family means that there will be new everything – roles, expectations, relationships, responsibilities and ways of relating to new family members. Each member of a stepfamily has a new role which needs to be defined, articulated and practiced. When the noncustodial parent does not support custodial home boundaries, it puts a child into the double-bind of having two homes and two sets of rules and values. Too often children end up being played like

pawns in the custodial/noncustodial chess game. One teen with great insight and atypical honesty described his dilemma this way:

My mom does a lot of stuff for me like money-wise. Like she will give me money or whatever I need. She'll help me with like anything. Yeah. And they argue a lot and we, like me and him like conflict because my mom has been this, you know, giving kind of, you know, spoiling type...she's an enabler. It's kind of a lot difficult for me. It's kind of like trying to make everybody happy. It's like doing this over on this side is not going to make this side happy and then, you know, just like because they're completely, both of my families are completely different, completely different lifestyles. I mean, they both have, you know, my mom is very wealthy and my dad isn't. But like [stepmom] and the [other] kids are kind of more like the LDS thing and that kind of stuff and then my mom is a complete atheist. And like, you know, it's like conservative, liberal, kind of like situation.

(Focus Group: 13-17, participant 1)

This kind of double standard can create an unhealthy, permeable boundary, allowing the child to move between two homes and avoid responsibility and the need to work through family conflict. This, of course, can lead to the stereotypical stepchild resistant response, "You're not my mom (or dad), I don't have to do what you say."

And that got escalated and escalated and escalated until like you know, you're selling your car; I'm taking your car away, dropping the insurance, the whole lot. I was just like I'm done. And I just kind of gave up and I just threw all my stuff in a bag and went out to my mom's. (Focus Group: 13-17, participant 1)

Some parents either knowingly or unintentionally place a child into the awkward role of being a parentified child. This role reversal can create an unhealthy and unnatural conflict for a child:

Then it was just super weird after that because then she would just come over and she'd sleep with my dad, like they would sleep on a like love sack or whatever that we had and 'cause I told him I wanted him around more. And so that happened and I was like well, this is really not what I expected, but oh well. I finally told him I was like, "Well, since this is taking place, you're not really setting a good example for me. You need to either get married or she needs to go home or something, 'cause like, I don't know, it's just not cool." (Focus Group: 18+, participant 3)

Managing Conflict

How families learn to handle conflict is foundational to the success of the blended family unit. Children in all families will occasionally attempt to split parents and vie for the sympathy of one over the other, and sometimes the child is nothing more than an innocent bystander caught in the middle of parental differences of opinion. In a blending family, the picture is even more complex and volatile when the biological and stepparent are at odds. If triangulation is allowed to develop and there is no intervention, marital and family relationships suffer. The quotation below captures this unhealthy triangle and demonstrates a child's feelings of distress and being the cause of the "problem:"

I caused a lot of problems in my family with my parents. My step dad would always say that I was a trouble child and my mom would stick up for me and therefore they would fight and yelling a lot. For the most part, they I don't know, the whole this is my kid, your kid is doing something wrong. That happened a lot in my family.
(Focus Group: 18+, participant 1)

How this type of conflict can impact the marriage is succinctly yet matter-of-factly expressed by this 11-year-old girl:

Well, our family is like, I sometimes feel like [stepbrother] is trying to split up my mom and dad. Like at one time my mom and dad didn't really, like, were kind of struggling with their marriage because of [stepbrother]. Like Dad would stand up for [stepbrother] and my mom would say no. (Focus Group: 8-12, participant 1)

When this type of response to conflicts occurs, power struggles, defensiveness, denial, blaming and protecting the biological child at any cost can be the natural result. This is an invitation for the four horses of the apocalypse (Gottman, 1993) to ride into the relationship. Mutual enmity between the stepchild and stepparent results, and the marital relational dyad is damaged, sometimes beyond repair. The beginning of the end is apparent in this 17-year-old's comments about his stepmother:

It was at my dad's. It just kind of started because. It was just kind of between me and [stepmom]. It just built and built and built and it just exploded one day and I just packed all my stuff and went to my mom's house. It was just the fact of I was getting so frustrated because [stepmom] wasn't parenting me except when she thought that I was doing wrong. Kind of like zero positive. It was like I'd come home and she wouldn't say hello. She would be like, you know, the first thing out of her mouth would be, "Why did we get a call from school saying you were absent?" And that was like consistent, every single day. (Focus Group: 13-17, participant 1)

When managing such conflict, some parents choose to discipline their own children and/or have to work extra hard to find middle ground, be on the same page and present a unified front to all of the children when managing conflict. This comment comes from the youngest of his family who is a common child of his parents and consequently has the luxury of feeling and displaying biological allegiance to both mom and dad.

Like my mom's kids like follow directions better if my mom tells them to. My mom tells me and then my dad's kids follow his better if he does it and like either one can tell me to do anything and I'll just do it, so I'm right in the middle. (Focus Group: 8-12, participant 3)

Commitment

Commitment to the new marriage and family was communicated in a variety of ways: seeking and sharing resources, family members showing/expressing confidence in successful blending, parents putting each other first, marital satisfaction and marital unity. If parents were unified in their decisions and approach to the family, children seemed to have an implicit level of comfort and stability and spoke about the experience with the feeling that parents were committed to the family:

For the most part, I guess in every situation my parents are unified in everything that goes on. Like if there is a problem with me or whatever, they will talk and both come to me now. In the past it was just my dad, but for the most part my dad is unified with [stepmother] and her advice that she gives to me or both so for the most part they're pretty unified. (Focus Group: 18+, participant 3)

Communication

Communication appeared to be the method and the means for achieving successful outcomes in all other thematic construct arenas. Several subthemes played a significant role in the stepfamily blending process for children. How, when, with whom and about what stepfamilies communicate were central to all communication processes. Family meetings and talking together at meal time helped families get and stay on the same page and helped communication get better over time.

I think over time we communicated better. My dad has always made sure that we have family meetings and get together and talk about things so that things are scheduled and planned out and my stepmom got better with it over time.
(Focus Group: 18+, participant 2)

Family communication often occurred around the table to calendar and plan and talk about problems, rules of the house and expectations for grades. However, a preference for talking as a group as opposed to talking alone with parents was expressed by this 8-year-old: “It's better than doing it by yourself because that's harder” (Focus Group: 8-12, participant 3).

Finding a balance between more formal set times to communicate as a group or speaking one-on-one was a common challenge for stepfamilies as viewed by the children. Often issues were discussed as they came up in lieu of a formal set time. Open, honest and respectful communication was universally valued, and positive, inclusive rhetoric helped the members of the family remain forward focused. One of the issues upon which many children as well as parents were somewhat divided is whether or not to use the term “step” when referring to nonbiological family members. Some examples of the variety follow – firm/fixed yes or no, mixed and based on how children feel toward other stepfamily members, or sometimes going through phases:

In the beginning we had a rule that we don't use step in our family, so they weren't my stepsisters, they're my sisters. (Focus Group: 18+, participant 1)

My stepmom is [given name] and my stepdad is [given name] and my parents are Mom and Dad. Well it is actually really weird, sorry, but when I'm talking to my dad about [stepmom] we always call her Mom. It's just like the house situation.

Oh, so when you're in that house she's the mom of that house. (Interviewer)

And so like when he like, he'll ask me you know "Where's Mom?" it will be like oh she's doing this or whatever. (Focus Group: 13-17, participant 1)

He just says like brother, but for our mom and his stepmom he calls, "This is my stepmom and this is my mom." (Focus Group: 8-12, participant 2)

We try not to use it, I don't know, because it makes it kind of awkward. Difficult to explain it, yeah, so when we have to I guess I do, but I try not to. (Focus Group: 13-17, participant 1)

We don't use it.

You don't use it. It's kind of forbidden and "we don't do that?" (Interviewer)

Yeah. I would get in trouble. Focus Group: 18+, participant 1)

You know, we never had a rule about it. I refer to my stepmom as my stepmom and I always will because when my dad married my stepmom I was 18 years old, and so I have my mom and my stepmom and I don't think, in that sense, I don't think it's a derogatory term. I don't think it's anything bad that I'm calling her my stepmom because she is, but she's still like a mom. With my stepbrothers, I have always referred to them as my stepbrothers, and it's probably because I've never been close with them because they're all punks. But with my stepsisters, I almost always call them my sisters. Sometimes I'll just say stepsister so people know that, but that's the only time usually. (Focus Group: 18+, participant 2)

We went through phases where it was like I don't think my dad ever, ever said like your kids or my kids, but my stepmom would do that sometimes when she was mad. She would like refer to me as my dad's daughter and not hers and her kids as her kids. It made me feel like we're not unified as a family, like we're separated. (Focus Group: 18+, participant 2)

While on one hand "step" is used to positively and concretely distinguish non-biological from biological ties to family members in public settings, it is also in used as a

disparaging and divisive tool to put distance between the “chosen” members of the family and those who somehow slipped in through the back door.

Three Most Important Points of Advice

One of the final study survey questions asked respondents which three pieces of advice they thought was most important to share with families that are just beginning the blending process. The 380 total responses were nearly evenly divided between Parents (191) and Children (189). Each response was assigned to one of the six thematic categories and then to subthemes within each category. In offering their advice, the respondents revealed their successes, struggles, hopes and challenges with a high degree of optimism. While the collective advice is more oriented to what facilitates stepfamily blending, respondents did not hesitate to identify barriers to stepfamily formation. A summary of the Three Most Important Points of Advice outcomes follow in Table 4.8. The first line in each thematic category lists the total number of comments for that particular theme and the total number of all comments made by parents and children respectively. Individual subthemes within each category are then listed followed by the number of comments for each subtheme. The top subthemes for each thematic category are highlighted to illustrate the most repeated themes of advice.

The advice offered from each of the thematic categories in total and in descending order of predominance is summarized below:

<u>Parents</u>		<u>Children</u>	
1) Relational	53	1) Relational	92
2) Communication	45 (tied)	2) Communication	38
3) Commitment	45 (tied)	3) Family Structure/System	22
4) Family Structure/System	18	4) Managing Conflict	17

Table 4.8: Three Most Important Points of Advice

THREE MOST IMPORTANT POINTS OF ADVICE PARENTS vs. CHILDREN		
THEME/Sub-theme	Parent #	Children #
1. RELATIONAL ISSUES	53/191	92/189
<i>Patience to change/accepting</i>	16/53	27/92
<i>Equality/individualized treatment TOTAL</i>	10/53	8/92
<i>Equality: Positive</i>	9/53	1/92
<i>Realistic expectations</i>	7/53	8/92
<i>LOVE (ADDED)</i>	5/53	9/92
<i>Time: spend as family/one-on-one</i>	3/53	5/92
<i>Emotional work/bidding for connection</i>	3/53	10/92
<i>Consistency</i>	2/53	2/92
<i>Reciprocity</i>	2/53	0/92
<i>Equality: Negative</i>	1/53	0/92
<i>Forced/traumatic blending</i>	1/53	7/92
<i>Flexibility</i>	1/53	0/92
<i>Second chance/forgiveness – modeling/teaching positive interactions/relationships</i>	1/53	5/92
<i>Feel like a family/feel unity</i>	1/53	7/92
<i>Modeling positive/negative patterns</i>	1/53	1/92
<i>Rewarding experiences/feelings</i>	0/53	1/92
<i>Adjustment: positive or negative</i>	0/53	2/92
2. COMMITMENT	45/191	16/189
<i>Marital Unity/being on same page-united front</i>	16/45	4/16
<i>Loyalty/trust</i>	10/45	0/16
<i>Seeking/using resources- counselors/professionals</i>	7/45	3/16
<i>Marital satisfaction</i>	6/45	2/16
<i>Preparation- dating, talking, planning</i>	3/45	3/16
<i>Confident in/evidence of positive outcome</i>	2/45	2/16
<i>Put spouse first</i>	1/45	0/16
<i>Uncertainty of outcome</i>	0/45	1/16
<i>Excitement/anticipation</i>	0/45	1/16
3. COMMUNICATION	45/191	38/189
<i>Openness, honest, direct, respectful, proactive</i>	26/45	21/38
<i>Unity talk</i>	4/45	0/38
<i>Positive communication/positive framing</i>	3/45	4/38
<i>Listening (ADDED)</i>	3/45	3/38
<i>Family councils/meetings-include kids in communication</i>	2/45	3/38
<i>Spousal support/protection</i>	2/45	0/38

Table 4.8 continued

<i>Normalizing/reframing</i>	1/45	1/38
<i>Humor</i>	1/45	0/38
<i>Amicable/positive comm. with or about non-custodial parent</i>	1/45	1/38
<i>Side-bar/debriefing</i>	1/45	0/38
<i>Modeling positive communication and patterns</i>	1/45	0/38
<i>Teaching/expressing empathy</i>	0/45	1/38
<i>Non-use of “step”</i>	0/45	1/38
4. FAMILY STRUCTURE/SYSTEM	18/191	22/189
<i>Family activities/traditions/meals</i>	5/18	8/22
<i>Approach</i>	4/18	8/22
<i>Religion – activity/resource</i>	3/18	2/22
<i>Age of kids – similar/different</i>	2/18	2/22
<i>Remarriage (divorce) – impact; positive or negative</i>	2/18	1/22
<i>Family picture/photos</i>	1/18	0/22
<i>New house – fresh start</i>	1/18	0/22
<i>Routine – work</i>	0/18	1/22
5. MANAGING CONFLICT	17/191	17/189
<i>Discipline: Topic as a whole</i>	10/17	4/17
<i>Discipline: OWN KIDS</i>	8/17	1/17
<i>Compromise/finding middle ground – present unified front</i>	2/17	0/17
<i>Side-bar/debriefing</i>	2/17	1/17
<i>Positive Attitude</i>	1/17	0/17
<i>Stepchild resistance</i>	1/17	1/17
<i>Discipline: GENERAL COMMENTS</i>	1/17	3/17
<i>Discipline: SHARED</i>	1/17	0/17
<i>Legal issues</i>	1/17	0/17
<i>“Your kids” “My kids” speak</i>	0/17	1/17
<i>Teaching and express empathy</i>	0/17	8/17
<i>Defensiveness, avoidance, minimizing, protecting</i>	0/17	2/17
6. BOUNDARIES	13/191	4/189
<i>Setting clear expectations/roles</i>	6/13	2/4
<i>Impact of non-custodial parent/family</i>	3/13	0/4
<i>Personal Space</i>	2/13	1/4
<i>Supporting bio-parent-bio-child relationship</i>	2/13	1/4

5) Managing Conflict	17	5) Commitment	16
6) Boundaries	13	6) Boundaries	4

Similarities between parents and children were surprising – 5 out of 6 of the choices by both groups matched in the pool of 63 subthemes. The only variation was in advice offered relative to Managing Conflict, where the difference in the advice offered appears to be tied to the hierarchical difference between parents and children: either disciplining (parents) or being disciplined (children). This distinction will be discussed under the advice for Managing Conflict below.

By far, parents' number one piece of advice for new blending families is to have Open/Honest/Direct/Respectful and Proactive communication (26/45), emphasizing the importance of the Communication thematic construct. More than a dozen study participants used the word “communicate” or “communication” alone or in conjunction with related counsel. Other noteworthy, direct iterations on communication counsel included: Parents be open and discuss issues; Communicate – openly, honestly, respectfully and with the mutual best for the family as the goal; Be transparent; maintain open communication; Communicate openly with spouse/partner about discipline, finances, concerns, etc.; Open communication is a must!; Communicate one with another, Be it parent to parent or kid to kid; Consistent daily couple speak and weekly/regular family talks; Talk openly to each other about expectations and desires; Talk to your partner about any concerns and always approach it from the needs of the children; Talk about any issues that come up early and often, as needed; Open communications should start *before* blending; Couples should realistically discuss “how this is going to work” before marriage; Discuss how you will parent the children (allowance, chores, curfews, etc.)

and be on the same page before marriage; If you and your intended spouse cannot communicate well and agree on parenting styles and discipline ahead of time, wait and get further education and training before marrying; Talk about change as often as possible; Learn, learn, learn; Set goals but start small; Mom and dad talk first and decide together; and Make sure ground rules are set before going into it.

Patience to Change/Accepting (27/92, Relational thematic construct) was the top piece of advice that children gave. Over 20 of the 27 admonitions (10+ more than parents) were direct and succinct statements to “Be patient,” “have patience,” or “patience.” Additional patience/acceptance recommendations: Give it time; Time smoothes out a lot of problems; It takes time for everyone to adjust, nobody is perfect either; Things get better over time; Sometimes kids just need to grow up some; Don’t get frustrated; The best relationships grow naturally over time; Be accepting and don’t judge. The quote below encapsulates the reward for being patient and accepting:

This is one of the hardest things to learn, not just in families. But being patient involves being realistic. You're not going to turn out like the Brady Bunch family. No no no...it becomes better, much sweeter. It will be tough, but often the toughest things in life are most worth it. If you want to get the most out of a blended family, you must do so patiently, and realistically. (Survey: open-ended response)

Parents’ second piece of advice echoed the number one choice by children: have Patience to Change and be Accepting (16/53, Relational construct). Both children and parents recognize the high need for patience in a blending family. The same patience mantras were repeated: “Have patience,” “Be patient,” “Patience;” and the following variations on the patience theme: Hang in there – it is a process; You need to be patient and allow relationships to grow; Allow the kids to grow up some too!; Blending takes time; Give it time, be patient, especially with teenagers; they’ll grow out of their difficult

stages and become more accepting; Let the children come along at their own paces; It takes time to form new relationships; It gets easier over time; and Have patience as children adjust to having to share their parent's attention.

Children's second recommendation for new blending families was to have Open/Honest/Direct/Respectful communication (21/38, Communication construct). Talking openly or communicating was described in a variety of ways but the message was the same: Communicate openly, a lot and with respect. Specific Open/Honest/Direct/Respectful communication suggestions were also given: And ask a lot of questions; Talk about things that bug you; When there are issues, deal with them and don't let them just pass by; and Talk about and identify how the two families are different and what different needs they have as individuals. The quotation below captures the need for safe, open, honest communication in blending stepfamilies, especially for children.

I think that it is really important to talk openly about feelings. I feel that children aren't always comfortable letting adults know that they feel hurt and sad. If they can feel safe talking about those feelings, I think it will help them deal with their future relationships and their self-esteem. (Survey: open-ended response)

A topic that emerged repeatedly in this section and was added to the communication construct is "Listening." From the children's survey: Listen to the children, their concerns are VALID; Do all you can to make them feel as they belong and listen to their needs as well. The urgency of this type of communication is underscored by this advice:

COMMUNICATION: this is a huge part of family life when issues are "pushed under the rug," "set-aside" and "never discussed taboo." that hinders the family. I am a huge advocate for talking things through and that includes listening, observing, pondering and reasoning.
(Survey: open-ended response)

The third most important point of advice for parents was for Marital Unity/Being on the Same Page/Presenting Unified Front (16/45, Commitment construct). From the comments that follow, parents obviously had experience with both being on the same page and not being unified. Some of the specific recommendations for marital unity included: The parents have to be a team; Make sure the parent and step-parent are on the same page about everything; Support one another at all costs; Present a united front in front of the children, negotiation behind closed doors; Mom and Dad have to discuss how best to raise the kids, be on the same page, and be united; Mom and Dad have to work together; No “my child” “your child;” Being unified with each other; Make sure you and the other parent are on the same page with rules, duties, caring, etc.; Get on the same page as your spouse and work to stay there; Be unified in front of the kids, even if you don’t agree with them; Later you can talk about it in private; Make decisions together as a couple.

For children, two areas of advice tied for number three in importance in the Family Structure/Systems construct: Activities/Traditions/Meals/Vacations (8/22) and Approach (8/22). Children urged: Have dinner together, ...at least 4 times a week; Do stuff together; Lots of family activities all together; Have fun designing the new traditions and pulling some of the old ones from each family; Create new traditions that just belong to the new family; Have fun. Children recognized the importance of a unified, happy, committed approach. Recommendations for the approach to blending consisted of: Try to make the home a happy place; Don’t give up; Remember that just because the other family does things differently, it doesn't mean that it's wrong; Keep an open mind to the different ways that a household can operate, be yourself and be true to

your family values; Incorporate the stepsiblings into those values that you have always held; Remember to include extended family members from both sides -- not just one; Be open minded to new things brought on by the marriage; Don't expect it to look the same as a traditional family. Do expect it to be just as good!

Number four in importance for parents was how to Discipline (10/17, Managing Conflict construct). This was the only area of difference between parents and children. The views can be seen through the hierarchical lens of the family: parents view discipline from a top down vantage point, having the role of administering healthy, correctional feedback for their joint offspring while the children feel the weight and consequences of discipline coming down on them. This perspective facilitates understanding of why parents are focused on “how” to discipline while at the same time children are concerned with “how it is received.” For parents, advice centered on providing general ideas for discipline and the dichotomy of disciplining your own kids or sharing discipline: Be firm; Discipline together; Stepparent should not start with intention of control; Discipline your own children; Step-parent should not take on a disciplinary role at the beginning; Have the birth parent do the majority of the disciplining; The stepparent needs to “step back” at first when dealing with behavioral issues; If they get involved too quickly, then it could create walls between the two of you as well as your spouse; Let the biological parent lead with her dealing with her children and do not hesitate to make rules. Contrastingly, children viewed the fourth most important piece of advice as being capable and effective in Teaching and Expressing Empathy (8/17, Managing Conflict construct). Children of blending families encouraged: Be Understanding; Being understanding and supportive as parents to the children; Try to understand everyone and

where they are coming from; Remember they are going through the same discomfort you are; Compassion.

Parent's fifth most important area of focus was Setting Clear Expectations/Roles (6/13, Boundaries construct). From a parental perspective, the following were essential for blending families: Establishing boundaries and standards early, clear expectations; Defining family and parent roles early, making sure ground rules are set before going into it; Set up boundaries aka house rules for stepchildren and any other children that come along so everyone is on the same page; All family members should state what they need: spouses, new parents, and what is expected of all of the children. Children echoed parents and made Marital Unity/Being on the Same Page/Presenting Unified Front their fifth priority for new blending stepfamilies (4/16, Commitment construct). Children endorsed the idea that marital unity benefits them and the entire family and offered these suggestions: Make sure the Mom and Dad are committed to this marriage, Parents have a united front, Mom and Dad have to be united, My mom and stepdad have Friday night as their date night - still do 17 years later!, Make sure both parents are on the same page.

The sixth and final area of importance highlighted by parents for new blending families was to make Family Activities/Traditions/Meals/Vacations a priority (5/18, Family Structure/System construct). Parents considered it important to: Eat meals together; Have regular, consistent family activities; Do things together as a family well before the wedding; Find common activities to do together and Make your own traditions. For children, the final piece of important advice was Setting Clear Expectations/Roles (2/4, Boundaries construct), which are defined succinctly as: 1)

setting clear and realistic goals and 2) Mom and Dad need to communicate with each other BEFORE they go to the children; Have boundaries.

Other subthemes that surfaced in the question requesting “Three Most Important Points of Advice” and in other open-ended questions merit mentioning: 1) Listening - counseling “Listen more than you talk;” 2) “Let children initiate physical affection” buttresses the suggestion to let children lead the parent-child relationship evolution; 3) Seeking Resources and Preparation were considered important to parents (lengthy courtship, professional counseling, seminars, classes education); 4) children and parents encouraged Second Chances and Forgiveness, children supporting these pieces of advice 5 to 1 over parents; 5) Normalizing/Reframing – especially appropriate advice for blending stepfamilies; and 6) parents admonished “Have faith,” and children recommended “family prayer” and “stay(ing) close to God throughout all of this.”

Finally, the Relational subtheme of “Love” was added due to the groundedness (repetition) and density (interconnectedness) of this topic. The advice to love one another was offered five times by parents and nine times by children; love is connected to all constructs and can be connected to any subtheme, suggesting an underlying need for both parents and children to feel loved. A blend of parent and child responses on love follows: Involve and invite them into the family with love, accept and healthy boundaries; Be patient with each other and express love for each other often; Be loving with your spouse; Make sure the other parent really loves your child; Love each other, have love; Remember to love everyone, it’s hard for them too, so be loving and active in your efforts; LOVE THEM ANYWAY.

Quantitative Analysis

The purpose of the Phase II the quantitative strand of the study was to 1) evaluate the association between thematic attitudinal and behavioral characteristics in stepfamilies, 2) measure the contribution of behavioral characteristics on blending family success and blending failure, 3) determine which behavioral characteristics contribute most to blending success, and 4) determine which behavioral characteristics contribute most to blending failure. An on-line survey was conducted to gather important demographic information specific to stepfamilies, unique factors that were hypothesized to affect the blending process, and to provide data for statistics analyses that would answer the quantitative research questions. First, a demographic overview of the parents and children who participated in the quantitative phase and on-line survey will be presented. A presentation of the statistical analyses (correlation analyses and linear regression analyses) that were performed using the separate data sets of the parents and children will be provided. Finally, the findings of the analyses will be reviewed and discussed.

Quantitative Sample

Respondents included 127 parents and 130 children and were residents of 10 states: Utah, California, Alaska, Arizona, Washington, Montana, Nevada, Idaho, Ohio and Indiana. The majority of the participants were mothers/stepmothers (72%) and daughters/stepdaughters, with 28% fathers/stepfathers and 40% sons/stepsons. A majority were also Caucasian: parents – 92% and children – 96%, and household income ranged from less than \$30,000 to over \$100,000. The educational level of the survey participants ranged from attending school, receiving GED or high school diploma to completion of post graduate work and doctorate/Ph.D. In most participant families, both

parents worked: 69% of parents and 58% of the children reported that both parents worked. Ages for participants ranged from 26 to 61+ for parents and from 8 to 60 for children. The average length of time married was reported to be from less than 1 year to over 26 years, and the religious preference was reported as: Latter Day Saint (Mormon) parents – 55%, children – 30% and 15% - Catholic, Christian, did not respond. Both parents (35%) and children (48%) respondents reported that their church provided support and services to help them in the family-blending process. The following types of stepfamilies were reported: Traditional Stepfather Family (father “steps” into mother’s family with her children) - parents (31%) and children (22%); Mixed (both parents bring children to the new marriage) - parents (51%) and children (58%); and Stepmother Family (mother “steps” into father’s family with his children) - parents (18%) and children (19%). The number of children brought to the marriage by one parent ranged from 1 to 9, while the total children brought to the marriage for both mom and dad ranged from 2 to over 7 children. Father and mother produced a shared child or children in 31% of the parent-reported families with 26% in the children-reported families. A detailed summary of the demographics for both the parent and child surveys follows in Table 4.9.

Statistical Analyses

For both data sets (parent and children), two statistical analyses were performed: 1) a correlation analysis to investigate associations between thematic constructs and 2) a linear regression analysis to examine the predictive values of thematic constructs on blending success. The constructs analyzed in both statistical analyses included: Relational, Family Structure/System, Boundaries, Managing Conflict, Communication and Commitment. Several linear regression analyses examined the predictive values of

Table 4.9: Quantitative Survey Demographics

Respondents

Mother/stepmother	72%	Daughter/stepdaughter	60%
Father/stepfather	28%	Son/stepson	40%

Race/Ethnicity

	Parents	Children
Caucasian	92%	96%
Mixed/Multiracial	6%	2%
Asian, Latino, or Native American	3%	2%

Household Income

	Parents	Children
No income to less than \$30,000	5%	16%
\$30,000 to \$50,000	17%	16%
\$50,000 to \$75,000	20%	19%
\$75,000 to \$100,000	27%	12%
Over \$100,000	31%	14%
Don't know household income		24%

Educational Level

	Parents	Children
Attending elementary, junior high or high school		15%
GED or high school diploma	6%	7%
Some college	27%	22%
Associate degree	8%	5%
Bachelor degree	26%	12%
Master degree	26%	35%
Ph.D.	4%	<1%
Other	3%	2%

Parent work schedules

	Parents	Children
Both parents do work	69%	58%
Both parents do not work	31%	42%
Mom works full-time	75%	56%
Mom works part-time	25%	43%
Dad works full-time	91%	98%
Dad works part-time	9%	2%

Table 4.9 continued

Current age

	Parents	Children
8 years of age to 17		21%
18 years of age to 25		37%
26 years of age to 30	7%	11%
31 years of age to 40	22%	14%
41 years of age to 50	35%	14%
51 years of age to 60	26%	3%
61 + years of age	10%	

Age when married current spouse/Age when parents married

	Parents	Children
1 year old to 10 years old		33%
11 years old to 19 years old		44%
20 years old to 30 years old	24%	19%
31 years old to 40 years old	43%	4%
41 years old to 50 years old	24%	
51 years old to 55 years old	9%	

Length of time parents married

	Parents	Children
Less than one year	9%	6%
One year thru two years	4%	5%
Two thru five years	25%	19%
Six thru ten years	30%	24%
Ten thru fifteen years	14%	15%
Sixteen thru twenty years	10%	22%
Twenty thru twenty five years	8%	4%
Twenty six years plus	1%	12%

Do you have a religious preference/attend church?

	Parents	Children
Yes	79%	67%
No	21%	33%

Religious preference

	Parents	Children
LDS	55%	30%
Catholic/Christian	44%	3%
Lutheran	<1%	<1%
Baptist		
Did not answer		67%

Table 4.9 continued

Frequency of attendance at religious services

	Parents	Children
Weekly	64%	61%
Monthly/Occasionally	13%	3%
Seldom/Never	23%	20%

Whether church provides support for blending families

	Parents	Children
Yes	35%	48%
No	65%	52%

Type of support church provides

	Parents	Children
Counseling	20%	10%
Classes	6%	5%
Support groups	4%	2%
Materials	10%	7%
Common faith/focus	11%	23%

Type of Stepfamily

	Parents	Children
Traditional stepfather family	31%	22%
Mixed	51%	58%
Stepmother family	18%	19%

Number of children brought to the marriage

	Parents/Mother	Parents/Father	Children/Mother	Children/Father
No children			6%	8%
One child	16%	19%	6%	5%
Two children	32%	26%	17%	13%
Three children	18%	24%	20%	23%
Four children	21%	16%	23%	24%
Five to nine children	13%	15%	30%	27%

Total children for both mom and dad

	Parents	Children
Zero to two children	14%	4%
Three to four children	31%	18%
Five to six children	25%	20%
Seven + children	30%	50%

Number of children mom and dad have together

	Parents	Children
Have children together	31%	26%
Do not have children together	69%	74%

thematic constructs and their associated attitudinal and behavioral characteristics on three different measures of blending success. The attitudinal characteristics were questions asking about the perceived “importance” of construct-related stepfamily behaviors/activities, and the behavioral characteristics were questions asking the “frequency” of performance of the same construct-related stepfamily behaviors/activities. The independent variables (IVs) are each of the constructs listed in Table 4.10 (specific questions relating to each IV construct are located in questions 33 (attitudes) and 34 (behaviors) in the parent survey [Appendix J] and questions 32 (attitudes) and 33 (behaviors) in children survey [Appendix K]). The three measures/dependent variables (DVs) are: 1) Marital Happiness, 2) Child Adaptation, and 3) Feeling Like a Family.

Parent Survey

In the parent correlation matrix, only one correlation between the three criterion variables (Average Child Adaptation, Marital Happiness and Feeling Like a Family) and the *attitude scales* was significant - Feeling Like a Family is correlated with Family Structure/System, $r(83) = .22, p < .05$ (see Table 4.11). In contrast, all except one correlation between the criterion variables and the *behavior scales* were statistically significant - Feeling Like a Family and Communication, $r(83) = .19, p < .05$. The correlation analysis indicates that, in general, behaviors are significantly related to blending family outcomes while attitudes are not. All of the attitude scales had moderate to high correlations with each other as did the behavioral scales.

In the multivariate analyses, parent-reported Child Adaptation and Marital Happiness were not significantly predicted (collectively) by the attitude scales (see Tables 4.12 and 4.13). The *attitude scales* did predict a significant amount of variance in

Table 4.10: Independent Variables

FAMILY STRUCTURE/SYSTEM (4)

Doing regular family activities.

Developing new family traditions.

Eating together as a family.

The older kids in the family becoming "big brothers" & "big sisters" to younger siblings.

BOUNDARIES (3)

Setting clear expectations; negotiating and defining family roles and boundaries.

Maintaining equality between all the children.

Maintaining custody boundaries and time limitations with noncustodial parents.

RELATIONAL (4)

Parents spending one-on-one time with each child in the family.

Mom and dad being positive and happy in the marriage.

Having patience to change.

Having realistic expectations.

MANAGING CONFLICT (3)

The family maintains a positive attitude.

Developing a new blended system for discipline that both parents agree on.

Having flexibility and using constructive conflict management.

COMMITMENT (4)

Mom and dad are unified and on the "same page."

Finding and using information to help the family.

Mom and dad being committed to each other.

Mom and dad being committed to blending the family.

COMMUNICATION (3)

Holding family meetings/councils.

Not using the word "step" when referring to family members.

Spend time talking about how and preparing to blend our two families together.

Total Independent Variables - 21

Feeling Like a Family ($r^2=.17, p < .01$). After controlling for the other variables, Communication (negatively) and Family Structure/System predicted Feeling Like a Family on the attitude scales (see Table 4.14).

Across the board the *behavior scales* significantly predicted positive Child Adaptation ($r^2=.21, p < .001$), Marital Happiness ($r^2=.55, p < .001$) and Feeling Like a Family ($r^2=.44, p < .001$) (see Tables 4.8, 4.9 and 4.10). For Child Adaptation, Commitment was the only variable that added predictive utility after controlling for the others ($\beta=.41, p < .01$). Commitment ($\beta=.28, p < .05$) and Managing Conflict ($\beta=.32, p < .05$) significantly predicted Marital Happiness after controlling for the other behavioral scales. Commitment ($\beta=.37, p < .01$) and Family Structure/System ($\beta=.31, p < .01$) significantly predicted Feeling Like a Family after controlling for the other behavioral variables.

From parent survey analyses, thinking or talking about the importance of behaviors appears to have little to no effect on behaviors. Furthermore, attitudes appear to have little if any impact on any of the healthy stepfamily formation outcomes. In fact, productive behaviors appear to be the only significant predictor of positive stepfamily blending outcomes.

Child Survey

In the bivariate correlations between the *attitude scales* and the three criterion variables (see Table 4.18), there were only three statistically significant correlations of the 18 possible correlations: Child Adaptation and Family Structure/System; $r(70) = .23, p < .05$; Feeling Like a Family and Boundaries, $r(70) = .26, p < .05$; and Feeling Like a Family and Family Structure/System, $r(70) = .31, p < .05$. In contrast, all of the

Table 4.11

Correlations: Parent Questionnaire Attitudes, Behaviors and Outcomes (N=85)

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Commitment (Att)	-													
2. Relational (Att)	.51*	-												
3. Boundaries (Att)	.39*	.61*	-											
4. Managing Conflict (Att)	.52*	.69*	.62*	-										
5. Communication (Att)	.52*	.53*	.40*	.48*	-									
6. Family Structure (Att)	.45*	.63*	.55*	.51*	.54*	-								
7. Commitment (Beh)	.10	.05	-.01	.02	-.10	.08	-							
8. Relational (Beh)	.06	.17	.08	.15	-.11	.17	.77*	-						
9. Boundaries (Beh)	.15	.44*	.51*	.40*	.06	.39*	.47*	.61*	-					
10. Managing Conflict (Beh)	.04	.19	.07	.23*	-.12	.14	.78*	.83*	.62*	-				
11. Communication (Beh)	.12	.21	.15	.33*	.12	.17	.43*	.41*	.34*	.51*	-			
12. Family Structure (Beh)	.19	.32*	.29*	.29*	.12	.46*	.49*	.65*	.57*	.56*	.34*	-		
13. Avg. Child Adaptation	-.07	-.01	-.16	-.11	-.11	.02	.40*	.35*	.24*	.29*	.22*	.29*	-	
14. Marital Happiness	.02	.06	-.08	.06	-.11	.09	.67*	.67*	.43*	.68*	.28*	.36*	.35*	-
15. Feeling Like Family	.02	.04	.06	-.05	-.21	.22*	.57*	.73*	.45*	.54*	.19	.55*	.40*	.38*

* $p < .05$

Table 4.12

Linear Regression: Attitudes Predicting Parent-Reported Child Adaptation			
Variable	B	β	t
Commitment	.000	.00	-.001
Relational	.44	.19	1.12
Boundaries	-.25	-.23	-1.55
Managing Conflict	-.19	-.14	-.84
Communication	-.13	-.14	-.98
Family Structure	.21	.18	1.19

r-squared = .071 (ns)

*p<.05 , **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 4.13

Linear Regression: Attitudes Predicting Parent-Reported Marital Happiness			
Variable	B	β	t
Commitment	.14	.047	.34
Relational	0.25	.078	.45
Boundaries	-.44	-.28	1.91
Managing Conflict	.30	.15	.93
Communication	-.35	-.25	-1.82
Family Structure	.47	.29	1.92

r-squared = .09 (ns)

*p<.05 , **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 4.14

Linear Regression: Attitudes Predicting Parent-Reported Feeling Like a Family			
Variable	B	β	t
Commitment	0.44	0.13	1.04
Boundaries	0.049	0.02	0.2
Managing Conflict	-0.35	-0.16	-1.15
Communication	-0.75	-0.49	3.82***
Family Structure	0.94	0.51	3.85***

r-squared = .17**

*p<.05 , **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 4.15

Variable	B	β	t
Commitment	0.42	0.41	2.39**
Relational	0.17	0.16	0.75
Boundaries	0.058	0.06	0.43
Managing Conflict	-0.25	-0.29	-1.34
Communication	0.045	0.049	0.41
Family Structure	0.12	0.116	0.83
r-squared = .21**			
*p<.05 , **p<.01, ***p<.001			

Table 4.16

Variable	B	β	t
Commitment	0.38	.28	2.19*
Relational	0.41	.28	1.78
Boundaries	0.041	.032	.32
Managing Conflict	0.37	.32	2.07*
Communication	-0.10	-.084	-.99
Family Structure	-.20	-.143	-1.37
r-squared = .55**			
*p<.05 , **p<.01, ***p<.001			

Table 4.17

Variable	B	β	t
Commitment	0.57	.37	2.81**
Boundaries	.13	.09	.87
Managing Conflict	.077	.06	.39
Communication	-.18	-.13	-1.42
Family Structure	.52	.31	2.94**
r-squared = .44***			
*p<.05 , **p<.01, ***p<.001			

correlations between the *behavioral scales* and the criterion variables were significant. Similar to the parent questionnaire, the correlation analysis indicates that, collectively, behaviors are significantly related to blending family outcomes while attitudes are not. Also, similar to the parent correlation analysis, all of the child attitude scales had moderate to high correlations with each other as did the child behavioral scales. The three criterion variables also had high to moderate correlations to each other in the child survey.

In the multivariate analyses of the child survey, child-reported average Child Adaptation ($r^2=.07, p > .05$) and child-reported Marital Happiness ($r^2=.05, p > .05$) were not significantly predicted by the *attitude scales* (see Tables 4.19 and 4.20). When predicting Feeling Like a Family, the attitude scales collectively predicted the dependent variable ($r^2=.16, p < .05$), but no variable was statistically significant after controlling for the others (see Table 4.21).

Collectively, the *behavioral scales* significantly predicted average Child Adaptation ($r^2=.43, p < .001$), child-reported Marital Happiness ($r^2=.60, p < .001$) and Feeling Like a Family ($r^2=.52, p < .001$) (see Tables 4.22, 4.23 and 4.24). Boundaries ($\beta=.48, p < .01$), Family Structure/System ($\beta=.29, p < .05$) and Managing Conflict ($\beta = -.43, p < .05$) all predicted Child Adaptation after controlling for the other behavioral scales. Surprisingly, the coefficient on child-reported Managing Conflict was significantly different from zero, but the relationship was negative (i.e., increases in child-reported Managing Conflict resulted in decreases in Child Adaptation. After controlling for the other behavioral variables, only Commitment predicted child-reported

Table 4.18

Correlations: Child Questionnaire Attitudes, Behaviors and Outcomes ($N=72$)

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Commitment (Att)	-													
2. Relational (Att)	.59*	-												
3. Boundaries (Att)	.63*	.75*	-											
4. Managing Conflict (Att)	.60*	.67*	.73*	-										
5. Communication (Att)	.57*	.76*	.59*	.62*	-									
6. Family Structure (Att)	.39*	.79*	.66*	.66*	.72*	-								
7. Commitment (Beh)	.01	.03	.06	.11	.06	.12	-							
8. Relational (Beh)	.05	.22	.16	.15	.12	.23	.83*	-						
9. Boundaries (Beh)	-.09	-.01	.05	.04	.02	.09	.76*	.77*	-					
10. Managing Conflict (Beh)	-.09	.05	.02	.10	.09	.19	.83*	.85*	.79*	-				
11. Communication (Beh)	.10	.22	.20	.15	.30	.25*	.37*	.38*	.43*	.49*	-			
12. Family Structure (Beh)	.06	.37*	.32*	.22	.31	.45*	.49*	.61*	.46*	.53*	.54*	-		
13. Avg. Child Adaptation	.05	.17	.21	.14	.07	.23*	.47*	.52*	.56*	.42*	.34*	.51*	-	
14. Marital Happiness	-.03	.11	.09	.12	.04	.12	.79*	.72*	.65*	.69*	.27*	.45*	.40*	-
15. Feeling Like Family	.02	.32	.26*	.15	.14	.31*	.61*	.79*	.58*	.58*	.35*	.62*	.53*	.54*

* $p < .05$

Table 4.19

Linear Regression: Attitudes Predicting
Child-Reported Child Adaptation

Variable	B	β	t
Commitment	-.14	-.08	-.46
Relational	.033	.02	.09
Boundaries	.22	.18	.87
Managing Conflict	.026	.01	.09
Communication	-.16	-.20	-.97
Family Structure	.22	.23	1.04

r-squared = .07 (ns)

*p<.05 , **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 4.20

Linear Regression: Attitudes Predicting
Child-Reported Marital Happiness

Variable	B	β	t
Commitment	-.44	-.17	-.97
Relational	.27	.13	.52
Boundaries	.12	.07	.32
Managing Conflict	.36	.17	.88
Communication	-.09	-.07	-.37
Family Structure	.018	.01	.05

r-squared = .05 (ns)

*p<.05 , **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 4.21

Linear Regression: Attitudes Predicting
Child-Reported Feeling Like a Family

Variable	B	β	t
Commitment	-.50	-.17	-.98
Boundaries	.69	.33	1.69
Managing Conflict	-.32	-.14	-.70
Communication	-.17	-.11	-.67
Family Structure	.60	.35	1.79

r-squared = .16*

*p<.05 , **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 4.22

Linear Regression: Behaviors Predicting
Child- Reported Child Adaptation

Variable	B	β	t
Commitment	.085	.09	.53
Relational	.22	.24	1.12
Boundaries	.38	.48	2.93**
Managing Conflict	-.33	-.43	-2.00*
Communication	.051	.05	.47
Family Structure	.26	.29	2.18*

r-squared = .43***

*p<.05 , **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 4.23

Linear Regression: Behaviors Predicting
Child-Reported Marital Happiness

Variable	B	β	t
Commitment	.69	.56	3.90***
Relational	.24	.19	1.09
Boundaries	.07	.06	.52
Managing Conflict	.01	.01	.09
Communication	-.09	-.07	-.79
Family Structure	.06	.05	.50

r-squared = .60***

*p<.05 , **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 4.24

Linear Regression: Behaviors Predicting
Child-Reported Feeling Like a Family

Variable	B	β	T
Commitment	.47	.30	1.88
Boundaries	.29	.20	1.42
Managing Conflict	-.04	-.03	-.18
Communication	-.10	-.06	-.63
Family Structure	.71	.42	3.94***

r-squared = .52***

*p<.05 , **p<.01, ***p<.001

Marital Happiness ($\beta=.56, p < .001$). After controlling for the other behavioral variables, only Family Structure/System predicted Feeling Like a Family ($\beta=.42, p < .001$).

Again, similar to the parent survey analyses, the child survey analyses indicate that having an attitude that behaviors are important appears to have little to no effect on behaviors. Moreover, attitudes appear to have little if any impact on any of the healthy stepfamily formation outcomes. Active behaviors appear to be the only significant predictor of positive stepfamily blending outcomes.

Discussion

From both the perspective of the bivariate correlations and the multiple regression analyses, there was consistent evidence that the behavioral scales were more strongly related to the positive family blending outcomes examined in this study. In most cases, the attitude variables had no relationship at all to the outcomes of interest. This pattern held in both the parent and child surveys. The one exception to this were parental attitudes predicting Feeling Like a Family, but it is notable that the magnitude of this relationship was less than a third of any of the effect sizes of the behavioral models ($r^2=.16$). Surprisingly, almost none of even the bivariate relationships were significant between attitudes and the criterion variables.

While it is clear from both the parent and child surveys that behavioral traits are predictive of positive blended family outcomes, there is less agreement on which ones are more important than the others (as judged by the regression analyses). Commitment was significant in all of the parent models after controlling for the other behavioral traits (and the effect was moderate in magnitude), but Commitment only predicted Marital Happiness in the child survey, after controlling for the other behavioral variables.

Boundaries and Managing Conflict significantly predicted Child Adaptation for youth but not for parents. Surprisingly, Managing Conflict was negatively related to Child Adaptation (higher ratings of Managing Conflict predicted lower Child Adaptation). This suggests that for children, the construct of Managing Conflict means something very different than it does for parents. Perhaps what parents observe as Managing Conflict, might be what children would call unusually harsh punishment. However, what a child observes as Managing Conflict, a parent may not even think of this as “punishment” but rather a consistent system of rules.

For the parents, it seems clear that behaviors favoring Commitment are more important than the other behavioral variables in predicting positive family blending outcomes. For children, it depends on the outcome of interest, but in general, almost all of the behavioral scales significantly predicted some form of positive outcome.

Most of the attitude scales asked parents and children to rate how important it is to perform various familial behaviors. These findings suggest that modifying beliefs about what is important to do as a family may have no effect on creating healthy family functioning or a positive family environment. In other words, just because a family member thinks a behavior is important does not mean that it increases the likelihood that he or she will actually perform this action. In fact, in this study, how important parents or children report a behavior to be does not tell one *anything* about how much they implement that behavior.

The relationships between all of the variables in this study suggest more of a pure behaviorist approach to improving blending family outcomes. From a clinical viewpoint, instead of spending time working on the cognitions of family members, a therapist’s time

might be better spent focusing on assisting family members to modify what they *do*. In other words, this study suggests that, for blending families, positive outcomes (Child Adaptation, Marital Happiness and Feeling Like a Family) might only be reached through positive family behaviors.

While these results do not infer causality, it is important to put their value into perspective. Cohen, Cohen, West and Aiken (2003) summarize three criteria for establishing causality: 1) Relationship: X is Correlated with Y, 2) Temporal Precedence: X precedes Y in time, and 3) Non-Spuriousness: The X-Y relationship holds even when the influences of other possible variables on this relationship are eliminated so that the effect can be said to be isolated. These criteria mean that each one is a necessary condition to show causality and also that they are collectively necessary for causality. Therefore, if any single one of the criteria is disproved, it is not the case that X causes Y. Based on this model of causality, this type of study can only identify the relationships among the variables of interest. It can establish that behaviors are shown to be related to positive mixed blending family outcomes (criterion 1). And just as notable, this study can rule out with high probability that most of the attitudes measured by this survey could cause positive blending family outcomes (because they are not related - also criterion 1).

Nevertheless, this study cannot yet rule out the possibility (and even likelihood) that outcomes such as Marital Happiness might actually cause the behavioral indicators measured in this study (like setting Boundaries or Managing Conflict). That is to say, the condition of temporal precedence (criterion 2) cannot be shown in research that involves a one-time survey. And there is the additional likelihood that there are other extraneous variables not examined in this study that were likely causing both positive outcomes and

the behavioral indicators (e.g., socio-economic status). This is the possibility of spuriousness (a violation of criterion 3).

In consideration of the conditions of causality, the results of this research highlight the relationship of the variables of interest (behaviors and attitudes). For study participant blending stepfamilies, the behaviors measured by this survey are related to positive mixed blending family outcomes. Likewise, the results of this study can reject with high probability the idea that most of the attitudes measured by this survey could cause positive blended family outcomes.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was: 1) to discover knowledge about the blending process of stepfamilies, 2) to explore the factors contributing to and inhibiting successful family formation in stepfamilies, 3) to reframe stepfamilies through a strength-based lens as unique and distinct family forms, 4) to expand the voice missing in much of the literature - the voice of the children involved in the blending process, and 5) to provide empirically-based research to promote intervention, program and policy development to assist in systemic change and improvement. This chapter will present the conclusions of the research findings through responses to the research questions in both strands of the study while addressing the accomplishment of the study purposes. Finally, implications and recommendations for practice, policy and research will be discussed, concluding with a study summary.

Conclusions

The research questions and responses follow the chronology of the research project as it was conducted. First, the qualitative research questions and conclusions will be presented followed by the quantitative research questions and analytical results and conclusions.

Qualitative Research

While all responses from parents and children fit into one of the six stepfamily constructs, respective views are influenced by family hierarchy and roles. It is important to consider this parental, top down perspective contrasted with the children perspective of bottom up while analyzing participant responses and research findings. It is important to note that all qualitative research question responses were categorized in the hexagon of thematic constructs.

Qualitative Research Question 1. The first qualitative research question sought to better understand the process and experience of stepfamily blending/family formation. The previous findings section provides a mosaic of the life of blending stepfamilies with considerable narrative depth and breadth. The separate parent and children perspectives provide additional insight and understanding of the lived experience of the entire blending stepfamily system. The data from this study suggest that the blending family system is a paradox that can be viewed through a dichotomous lens. For both parents and children, the experience of bringing two families together is both challenging and rewarding. There is the difficulty of letting go of some of the old familiar patterns and environments while testing and embracing many new ones. Most parents said they were not prepared for the extreme difficulty of family blending and had only focused on the reward of connubial happiness and a renewal of important family relationships. Patience, acceptance, realistic expectations, flexibility and persistence are all bywords of daily stepfamily living. Feelings of natural affection are not often present in the beginning and come only through spending time together.

The ultimate goals for blending stepfamilies are reflected in the outcome measures in the survey. First and foremost, this study confirms the findings in the literature that the springboard to making it all work is a happy marital partnership. Second, successful blending families work at creating an environment where everyone feels like a family and that they belong. According to study participants, the best way to feel like a family is to spend time doing activities together, everything from the mundane – meals, work, cooking, games – to big events – vacations, recreation, holidays. Blending stepfamilies who considered themselves successful work at planning for and consistently spending time together. One father encapsulated the ideal, “We did everything together. Almost all of our activities were family activities...” (Couple Interview 1). Third, achieving positive adjustment for children in blending stepfamilies is supported by creating an environment conducive to family relationship development where children feel like they belong. The overall study and specifically the Relational construct are replete with examples of ways to build supportive bonds with children in ways that facilitate healthy adjustment. Both parents and children advised not to force relationships but to allow the family time and opportunity to test out relational nuances and boundaries. Learning to have patience for change and to be flexible and persistent were considered essential to provide the stable and consistent structure that promotes positive adjustment. Study participants recommended unconditional love, acceptance and support for stepchildren as the glue for adjustment. According to study results, this is the trifecta of stepfamily blending success. This tripartite view of a blending stepfamily system assesses the entire family focal system (Feeling Like a Family), marital dyad (Marital Happiness), and children subsystems (Child Adjustment).

The following quotations capture the experience, approach, challenges, realities, acceptance, successful methods and rewards of the paradoxical stepfamily blending experience:

The approach ideal:

Wife: We both discipline. We think of them all as ours.

Husband: Yeah, we talked about that before we got married and I tried to, I always did my best to make it clear to her that, even before we got married, I consider her kids our kids. They're all our kids. And I think as long as we keep that in mind, there isn't that issue. (Couple Interview 10)

The struggles:

“The most difficult thing that I've had to figure out is where I am in the slice of the pie.” (Couple Interview 5)

“Relationship development is a complex, sometimes messy, process that may be filled with turbulence” (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup & Turman, 2001).

Facing reality:

Defiant young men who “you're not my mom, you can't tell me to do” that and “you have blankety-blank screwed up my father's life,” and they were more flowery language than that. (Couple Interview 4)

We crashed their family and we're the ones who moved in and took dad away from the rest of the girls. (Couple Interview 6)

Wife: The ex-spouses are going to not like you very much. Just be prepared. His ex-wife hates me.

Husband: Just to go ahead and shoot the exes and we'll be out of prison in 6 or 7 years. (Couple Interview 8)

Wife: I think [husband's] really easy on his kids. I don't, you know.

Husband: I think [wife] is really easy on her kids. (Couple Interview 8)

Coming to acceptance:

If you try to mold that nuclear family foundation of emotions and expectations and just bonding, it doesn't work the same and it's not going to work. Unless other parents are out of the picture completely it won't work. So, don't try to put snowshoes on when it's summer. (Couple Interview 5)

And she...in the last year or two just realized this is the only role I can play. I don't have to be a super mom. I am a stepparent; I'm not his mom, I'm not his blood and I'm not emotionally attached like he is to his other two parents and that's okay. And I think a lot was lifted off her shoulders when she finally decided or figured that out. (Couple Interview 5)

Wife: I think it's accepting that you are going to have to compromise with someone else.

Husband: Yeah. Well not even compromise but you're going to have to give in. (Couple Interview 3)

The reasons it worked:

I think [we] really blended pretty easily for the most part. I don't think it's just 'cause of luck. I think it's due more, when you start thinking about it's *because we have worked at it*. (Couple Interview 10)

We did everything together. Almost all our activities were family activities: movies or games, cleaning the house together; work... painting a room together, cleaning up the garage together, washing the car together, you know, just about everything. [Stepdad] has this deal about even if we're working together, you put on some music, you have some pizza and you have a good time. Telling jokes. Silly videos. My kids had a hobby of creating silly videos, creating really, really stupid original home movies. (Couple Interview 1)

The rewards:

Most of the time I communicate with her late at night. It's like at 11:00 p.m. and I'll come home and we'll just start talking about stuff. Most of the time my dad's just kind of tired, and he'll go to bed and that's usually when we communicate. We'll have conversations like this ... I want you to be in my life for the wedding and, you know, she said, "No, I don't want to be there because I'm not your mom," you know. And so I told her, I was like "Well, we want you there. I feel like you're my mom. I want you to be there standing next to me" and stuff, and she agreed. (Focus Group: 18+, participant 3)

But because he supported me, it has made us; I mean it has given me that like, "you know what, wow! This feels good." I love him and he knows I love him, but to have him support me like actually builds your relationship. It's so huge for that stepparent to feel that, "Hey, I'm behind you." (Couple Interview 5)

Finally, seasoned veterans of the blending family process emphasized that due to the challenges of merging two families together, it is imperative that blending stepfamilies take time to step back and look at the incremental progress they are making.

Qualitative Research Question 2. The purpose of question number two was to identify facilitators to stepfamily blending. Facilitators were identified directly and indirectly in the qualitative phase. Additional input and validation of facilitators came from the survey as participants responded to various open-ended questions and one direct question soliciting advice for new blending families. Following is a list of *facilitators* according to both parent and children participants in this study, organized into thematic constructs. Facilitators identified exclusively by children are identified by **. The thematic constructs and subthemes are listed in descending order of predominance according to the qualitative ranking by the number of codings as presented in the findings in Chapter 4.

Facilitators

Relational

- Patience
- Acceptance
- Spending time together and one-on-one
- Equality - establish and maintain
- Allow relational evolution
- Expect, understand and support adjustment challenges
- Consistency: reliability and dependability
- Transformational opportunities: significant events – new marriage, shared child, blending family
- Modeling healthy behaviors
- Unconditional love, acceptance and support for stepchildren
- Flexibility
- Persistence
- ** Feeling of belonging
- ** One-on-one time together
- ** Evolving Relationship

Family Structure/System

- # 1 – Family activities, traditions, meals, vacations, work, chore assignment
 - (closely related to spending time together)
- Similar ages

- New home for both families
- Shared child(ren)
- ** Family activities, traditions and meals
- ** Children of similar ages / shared child (sibling)

Boundaries

- Defining family roles and expectations (house rules, etc.)
- Realistic expectations
- Extended family involvement
- Support ongoing biological parent-child relationship
- ** Setting and maintaining healthy boundaries

Commitment

- Marital unity – on the same page/present unified front
- Counseling/therapy
- Resources – stepfamily education, seminars, books, classes
- Preparation – family talks about changes and expectations
- Marital satisfaction
- Put spouse first
- Cultivate loyalty and trust
- Cultivate attitude of confidence

Managing Conflict

- Agreed upon discipline system
- Parental side-bars/debriefings
- Empathy – teach and express
- ** Two-way responsibility
- ** Second chance

Communication

- Limited use of “step” – distinction
- No “your kids,” “my kids” speak
- Open, honest communication – emphasis on listening
- Family meeting/council
- One-on-one communication
- Positive communication with and about ex-spouse
- ** Family meetings and talking together at meals

Qualitative Research Question 3. The objective of question three was to identify obstacles to stepfamily blending. Obstacles were identified directly and indirectly in the qualitative phase, with additional input and validation from the on-line survey and open-

ended questions, with one direct question soliciting advice for new blending families.

The following is a list of *obstacles* as provided by parent and children participants in the study, organized by thematic construct. Obstacles identified wholly from the children's perspective are identified by **. Identical to the facilitators, thematic constructs and subthemes for obstacles are listed in descending order of predominance according to the qualitative ranking by the number of codings as presented in the findings in Chapter 4.

Obstacles

Relational

- Split loyalty
- Forcing
- ** Forced blending
- ** Split Loyalty – “Caught in the middle”

Family Structure/System

- Illness - mental/emotional/physical/substance abuse
- ** Illness/addiction

Boundaries

- # 1 – Impact of other custodial/non-custodial parent
- ** Two sets of rules – “double-bind”
- ** Unhealthy permeable boundaries
- ** Parentified child

Managing Conflict

- Triangulation/parent-splitting
- Resistant stepchildren/children
- Conflict avoidance
- Two sets of rules between different houses
- Spousal support and protection

Communication

- ** “Step” – “mom” or “dad” of this house

It is important to remember that each of the thematic constructs and subthemes that make up the facilitators and obstacles can be viewed dichotomously. Analogous to looking at both sides of the same coin, blending stepfamily members either value and perform identified constructs (heads) or they do not (tails). Using this bifocal lens provides an understanding that one side of the coin can be a facilitator while the opposite side may be an obstacle to the process of blending stepfamilies.

The unique perspective and voice of the children again surfaces in this collection of facilitators and obstacles. Children have more of a micro, self-centered view of their life experience and consequently Relational concerns of feeling like they belong, spending one-on-one time with parents and evolving relationships – *doing and being*. Contrast the child's view with the parent macro outlook on organizing, orchestrating and directing family system equality, consistency, flexibility, modeling healthy behaviors and transformational opportunities - *creating and directing*. Children have a peer-to-peer focus on the Family Structure/System as a forum for participation in (doing) family activities with children of similar ages, while parents focus is on the organization and administration (creating) of those same events.

At the same time, parents and children identified split loyalty (“being caught in the middle”) and forced blending as clear obstacles to successful family formation. For both parents and children, illnesses of any kind but particularly mental and emotional illness stifled closeness and unity. Setting and maintaining clear, healthy boundaries, roles and expectations are important to children because they have two homes and two sets of standards and values and hate the double-bind of “trying to make everybody happy.” Children also resent being put in the position of being a parentified child with

the expectation of disciplining other family members or to be a check and balance for a parental behavior. For parents, the same boundary issues are motivated by the desire to have children perform expected responsibilities and assignments and to prevent unhealthy, permeable boundaries that enable children and allow them to run back and forth from house to house avoiding responsibility and accountability. Additionally, and also boundaries related, parents view the impact of the noncustodial/other custodial parent as being the number one impediment to successful blending, whereas children see the noncustodial/other custodial parent as the other half of the biological connection to their own family.

As previously highlighted, for parents Managing Conflict is about being on the same page in administering the type as well as the duration of discipline, while for children it is about how discipline is received. Children place an emphasis on two-way responsibility, getting a “second chance,” and forgiveness. While the remarriage can be a second chance for everyone in the blending family, the process is experienced differently for a child whose only relational paradigm is the nuclear family. Divorce shatters the “lived happily ever after” family archetype for children and parents, yet for children alone the nuclear family is the only intimate relational experience they have ever had. For parents, a marital relationship, while intimate and personal, is a second intimate relational experience. Parents often have their own nuclear family experience as a foundation on which to fall back when the current relationship ends. Finally, for children Communication is seen as more of an interactional event (doing) paralleled by the parental approach to communication topics as family blending priorities that need to be orchestrated and performed after defining the “dos and don’ts.”

In summary, the micro, self-oriented lens of children magnifies their focus on what they want and need and how those wants and needs make them feel. Comparatively, parents share a big picture vision of the family structure and are motivated to properly and perfectly direct total and complete family blending success. Human development life stages, age and family and gender roles assist in understanding similarities and differences in parent and child perspectives. In modern culture, the parental position views a father as taking the paternal role, which inherently provides boundaries, structure, accountability and protection in tandem with a mother, who performs the maternal role of nurturing, rendering care, sensitivity, compassion and love. The ideal child is viewed as an obedient, subservient and noble individual whose mission is to be a significant contributor to the family system and to society in general. Due to the nature of the unique dynamic of blending stepfamilies, stepfamily roles require greater flexibility and variability from traditional, societally-viewed family roles.

Qualitative Research Question 4. The fourth qualitative research question proposed to obtain advice from experienced blending stepfamilies for those just beginning the experience. A comprehensive view of the advice offered was provided in Chapter 4. As discussed in the findings, similarities between parents and children were remarkable, as both groups matched on 5 of 6 choices out of 64 subthemes. Managing Conflict was the only variation in advice offered. Hierarchical position may explain the difference in viewpoints on conflict – parents being focused on how to administer discipline and children on the importance of empathy in determining what the punishment should be and how it should be delivered. These two perspectives, “discipliner” and “disciplinee,” provide a credible explanation of motivation behind both

viewpoints. A summary of the “Three Most Important Points of Advice” follows in Table 5.1. Previously identified study themes surfaced again in the survey in response to this open-ended question: “What are the three most important points of advice you would give a new blending family who is just getting started?” The most important points of advice are ranked from 1 to 6 for both parents and children.

It is clear that experienced parents and children alike make nearly the same recommendations across the board, perhaps indicating that, while the experiences of both are different and unique, their perspectives of what is needed for blending success are quite similar. Based on survey responses of 127 parents and 130 children, these six areas deserve attention by those considering and/or pursuing the blending of families.

Table 5.1 - Three Most Important Points of Advice - Summary

	Parents	Children
<i>Patience to change/accepting</i>	2	1
<i>Marital unity/being on same page-united front</i>	3	5
<i>Openness, honest, direct, respectful, proactive</i>	1	2
<i>Family activities/traditions/meals</i>	6	3
<i>Discipline: Topic as a whole / Teaching and express empathy</i>	4	4
<i>Setting clear expectations/roles</i>	5	6

Quantitative Research and Questions

The purpose of the quantitative phase of the study was to evaluate the association and contribution of attitudinal and behavioral characteristics related to both positive and negative family formation outcomes by answering four research questions.

The study found that behavioral characteristics are strongly and consistently related to positive blended family outcomes from both the perspective of parents and children. Surprisingly, attitudes towards these behaviors had small or no relationships to the same outcomes. Almost all behavioral scales were correlated with child and parent outcomes, while few of the attitude scales showed similar correlations. All of the behavioral regression models showed large, significant effects on the outcomes of interest, while the attitude regression models showed small or no significant effects on these outcomes.

While it was clear that behaviors were influencing blended family outcomes as opposed to attitudes, which behaviors were most important to the success and failure of a blended family differed between children and adults. For parents, communication behaviors are clearly the characteristics most likely to result in positive blended family outcomes. Nevertheless, all the behavioral variables measured in this study contribute something to positive family outcomes. For children, it is also the case that behavior characteristics are influencing the outcomes, but which is most important depends on the outcome of interest. According to the regression analyses, a child's observation of a happy marriage appears to be most influenced by Commitment, Feeling Like a Family is most influenced by family structure, and Boundaries have the greatest effect on Child

Adaptation. Collectively, study findings suggest that success of a blended family results from increases in these behaviors and failure would result from their decrease.

Implications/Recommendations for Practice

There are various implications for practice and clinical education. Many of the unique challenges blending stepfamilies experience often present with clinical significance (Portie & Hill, 2005). Considering the prevalence of blending stepfamilies in society – one-third of all Americans (Booth & Dunn, 1994) – and the significant academic, vocational, health, relational problems (Michaels, 2006) and general high degree of distress (Nicholson & Sanders, 1999), the utility of the outcomes of this research can be clinically significant. The benefit of treatment application of this research is especially important for stepfamilies as research has shown that psychological well-being and relational quality are predicted by how families process rather than by their structure (Landsford, Ceballo, Abbey & Stewart, 2001). Developing behaviorally-anchored clinical interventions using the identified constructs, facilitators and obstacles that are specific to blending stepfamilies is imperative. Psychoeducation is vital to help blending families know what to expect in order to facilitate normalizing and reframing specific struggles and associated intense emotions. This information can also be useful to assist parents in modeling and practicing specific blending stepfamily adaptive and relational skills. Teaching these skills from a strengths-based approach (Golish, 2003) is critical for stepfamilies who live in a “deficit-comparison” (Ganong & Coleman, 1994) society, which often views this type of family structure as a reconstituted amalgamate of two broken homes.

Professionals can assist blending stepfamily clients in developing specific behavioral strategies and skills to promote successful family formation. Communication is the hub of the relational wheel (Figure 5.1) and part and parcel of all other blending stepfamily constructs. Communication is the method and the means for achieving positive Relational, Family Structure/System, Boundaries, Managing Conflict and Commitment outcomes.

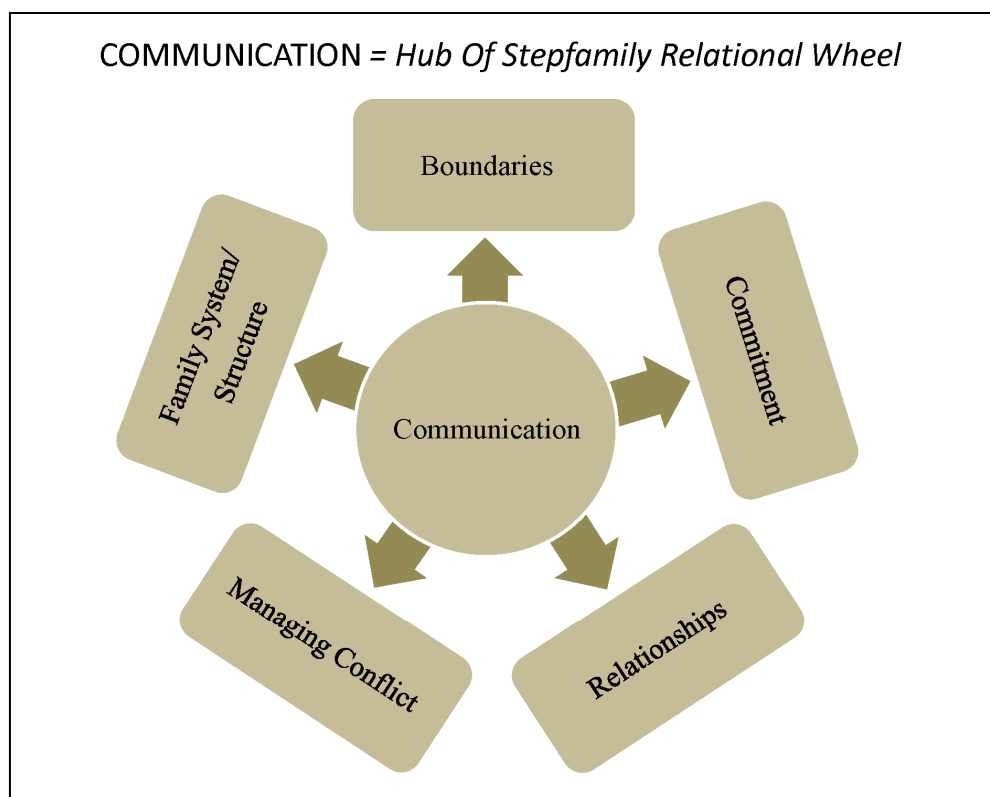


Figure 5.1. Blending Family Relational Wheel

Developing skills to enhance open, honest and frequent family communication is vital. Study results suggest that members of stepfamilies will benefit from frequent and consistent family meetings where all members are able to provide input into family activities, house rules and discipline. Parental “side-bars” are important to give couples a

chance to get on the same page and present a united front to their children. Another important skill to develop is tolerance of ambiguities. The goal is to 1) decrease black and white thinking, and 2) recognize permeable boundaries, multiple options, shades of gray, degrees of acceptability, and incremental progress. Using the family system lens, it can be effective for clinicians to look for systemic dynamics and challenges and hold mixed types of sessions with blending family subsystems, primarily the marital dyad in the early stages of blending, as many marriages do not last through the adjustment phase. It is vital that the “parental subsystem is strong and separate from the offspring system” (Kelley, 1992), emphasizing that *the speed of the marital engine is the speed of the family train*. Perhaps the greatest insulation on merging family systems from the challenges of adjustment is the development of problem-solving skills and conflict management skills. Finally, finding and/or creating middle ground ultimately puts everyone on common “higher” ground.

A fundamental clinical goal is to assist the family in creating a new family identity and culture while allowing flexibility for individual and family evolution. Creating a new identity comes from spending a lot of time together. Clinicians can help blending families create new family activities, routines/rituals, traditions (holidays, birthdays, vacations, etc.) that will provide opportunities for time together to develop and strengthen individual and collective family bonds. It is important to help blending stepfamilies articulate what they want their family to look and feel like. A final clinical admonition is to resist the urge to pathologize while working with blending stepfamilies. Instead, clinicians should assist stepfamilies in developing empathy, problem-solving capacity and emotional regulation skills. It is also important to help blending families

connect with educational resources, seminars and support groups, which can provide knowledge for blending family skill development. It is important to note that the researcher is a clinician who works with blending stepfamilies and receives frequent referrals from other therapists to work with this population. Blending couples and families benefit greatly from working with knowledgeable professionals who understand their uniquely challenging path and can assist in identifying facilitators and obstacles to positive outcomes.

A developmental model for blending stepfamilies has application and utility for practice, policy and research. The Blending Stepfamily Developmental Model (see Figure 5.2) incorporates the two theoretical frameworks that were used in the literature review and have served to shape, organize and interpret the study findings. Two single parent family systems suffer the “shocking and sudden event” of divorce and remarriage (Anfara & Mertz, 2006), which creates “movement toward more developmentally progressive meaning perspectives” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 192). The “presenting dilemmas” described by Mezirow (1991) are both the breakup of a marriage and the merging of two family systems, which creates a stimulus for transformational learning and intra/interpersonal development. In this transformation phase, families are primed to engage in developmental activities that will promote family blending and cohesion. Communication is used by the family as the portal to collaboratively identify, create and disseminate family building events and activities in each of the blending stepfamily constructs: Relational, Family Structure/System, Boundaries, Managing Conflict and Commitment. How families *process* these developmental activities is key to blending outcomes; family *structure* is irrelevant (Landsford et al., 2001).

As a blending stepfamily learns to process and implement behaviorally-anchored responses, they begin to create facilitators that reduce or eliminate obstacles to blending success. The emphasis for blending families and providers who work with them is *process and action*. The visual depiction of the blending stepfamily developmental process described in Figure 5.2 highlights a strengths-based approach to the challenging precipitating events of divorce and remarriage and the transformational opportunities for individuals and families. The remarriage creates a healthy paradigm shift that prepares the new family to identify areas of emphasis for action, which empowers the family system for blending success.

From a broad practice perspective, there are implications at all levels and stages of practice: 1) primary - prevention, psychoeducation for parents and children; 2) secondary - stabilizing, repairing, and restoring; and 3) tertiary - crisis intervention and divorce prevention. There are implications for education/continuing education of social work educators and students (BSW, MSW, Ph.D. programs), other social sciences/fields of behavioral health care (psychology, sociology, psychiatry) and behavioral healthcare providers (psychologists, psychiatrists, MFTs). The incorporation of blending stepfamily research and findings into curriculum to prepare clinicians, providers and educators is recommended. Providing blending family education for academia, including all school professionals (school counselors, school psychologists, teachers and administration) will be helpful and important.

Human service agencies should have as a priority the provision of blending family education, training and support for staff and clients. Child welfare and juvenile justice professionals work with biological, foster and adoptive parents and focus on the well-

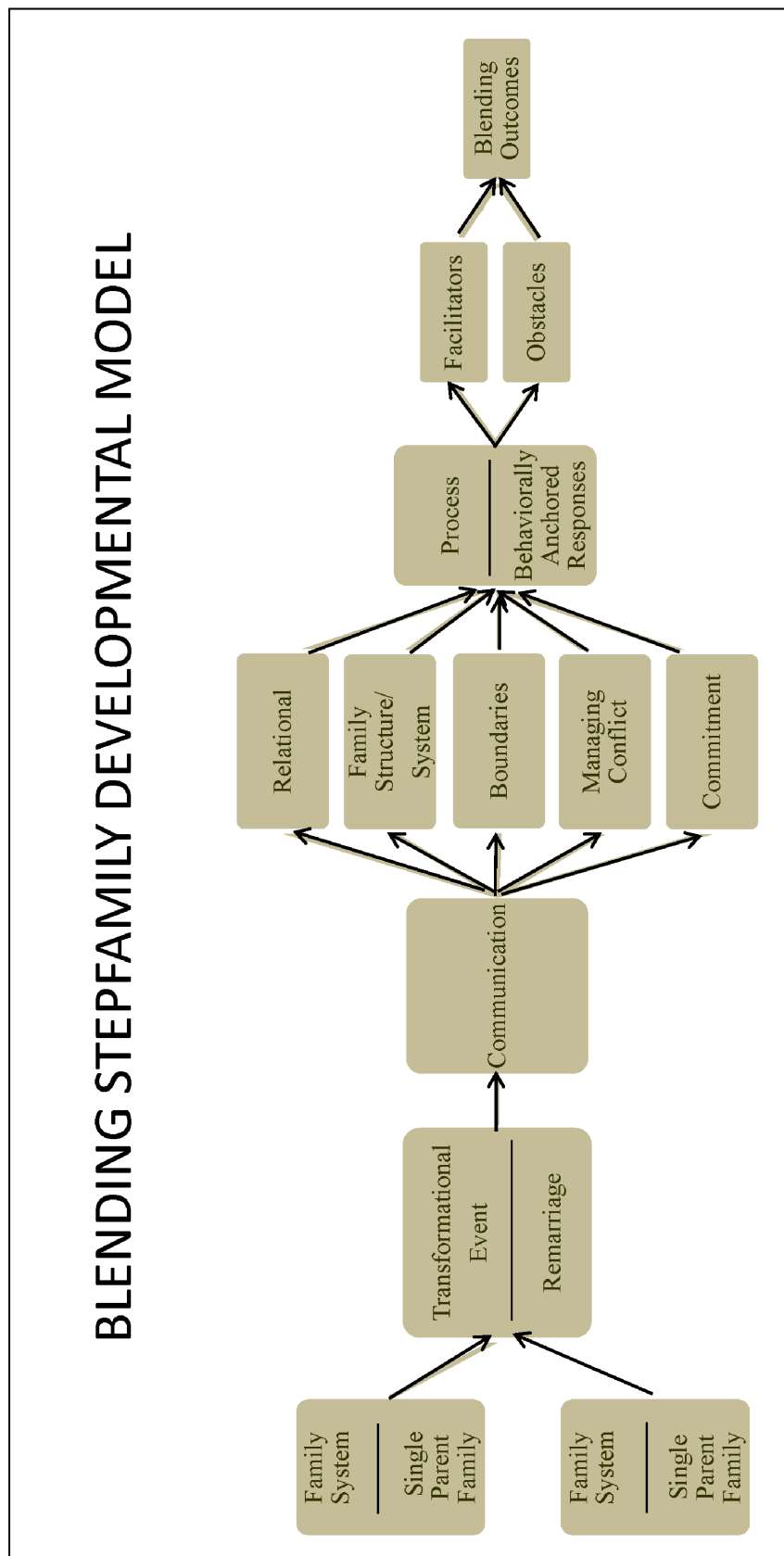


Figure 5.2. Blending Stepfamily Developmental Model

being and rehabilitation of children, youth and families. These professions need access and training on blending family education, programs and resources for the benefit of those they serve. Ecclesiastical leaders and ministers work with couples and families and often have a role in premarital, couple and family counseling and mediation and can also benefit from blending family resources. Medical professionals, as well as child development and family and consumer studies specialists, would also benefit from trainings and education. The publication of books and articles; distribution of educational materials; participation in behavioral and general health care conferences and seminars; development of websites that host webinars, support on-line courses and provide access to blending family resources and links should be explored as fundamental mediums to improve practice with blending families at a variety of levels.

Implications/Recommendations for Policy

The necessity for improved support and systems for this population is evident. Blending stepfamilies are a significant part of modern society with distinctive challenges and needs. There are a variety of relational and health related problems specific to this population that carry with them significant human and societal costs – divorce and custody battles; relocation; remarriage; job, academic and social impact; physical and emotional disruption; and related illnesses. As with all misunderstood populations, this distinct family form can make a greater contribution to society as more is learned about the unique dynamics of blending stepfamilies. There is a need to create programs and evidence-based interventions and support their implementation at a policy level.

The efforts of policymakers will be facilitated to the extent that society's unresolved attitudes and dysfunctional view of stepfamilies as "recycled" can be

changed, and the doctrine that blood not performance determines relationships and parenthood is an “ascribed” rather than “achieved” role can be challenged (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). Toward this end, there is a need to educate and inform the general public, professionals across multiple disciplines, and legislators regarding the strengths and challenges of blending families. Development and implementation of interventions that are population specific can prevent, reduce and ameliorate the unique difficulties that blending families experience. A policy to implement mandatory participation in blending stepfamily education and counseling would prepare blending stepfamilies prior to remarriage and in the critical early stages of family formation thus increasing positive family blending outcomes. Human service programs and services specifically developed for blending couples and families who present for services are also recommended. Promoting other names/titles for blending families other than “step,” e.g., multidimensional families, transformative families, integrated families, will assist in reducing the stigma that exists for non-nuclear family forms. For successful policy development and implementation, ongoing blending family research and education are paramount.

Implications/Recommendations for Research

This study has contributed to a relatively small but growing body of research on blending stepfamilies. In addition to confirming and expanding on the unique characteristics and experience of blending stepfamilies found in previous research, this study makes an important contribution to the call for greater attention to the manner in which children experience the blending process (Amato, 1994; Baxter et al., 2004; Gamache, 1997; Schrodtt, 2006). Additional research is necessary to validate the

collective findings and expand the knowledge base on the entire stepfamily system. Moreover, there is a significant need to increase evidence-based research to support effective interventions and programs for stepfamilies (Forgatch, Degarmo, & Beldvas, 2005; Nicholson & Sanders, 1999). Specifically, experimental studies should be designed and conducted which will test factors predictive of healthy family formation or dissolution. The development and creation of behaviorally-based interventions, including activities, role play and homework assignments with follow-up will provide educational and clinical practice value.

Research is also necessary to test the causal relationships suggested by this study to rule out other possible inferences that this study allows. A longitudinal study that attempts to modify the behaviors measured by this study evaluated over time is indicated to determine if and how changes in the behaviors result in changes in family outcomes. The results of this study also question the value of continued research into areas of modifying attitudes (of the types measured here) in an attempt to improve blending stepfamily outcomes.

The researcher plans to continue with future, including longitudinal, research. Many participants in this study (56 parents and 35 children) provided contact information and accepted an invitation to be contacted to participate in future studies. This provides an opportunity to re-contact and re-engage these individuals regarding participation in future research as well as assessing their interest in being involved in projects to assist other blending families, e.g., training for peer support and in-home mentoring/education. In addition to expanding the voice of stepchildren, research looking at specific age groups (younger children: 5 to 10 years of age, tweens: 11-13, and teens/adolescents: 14-19) will

provide a greater understanding of age/developmental stage specific issues and perspectives. Exploring what role race, ethnicity, culture, gender and religion/spirituality play will be valuable as well as additional research into the process of blending for other family forms. Seeking funding through state, federal and other grant sources and resources is recommended, not only to support research efforts but also for education, training, evidence-based intervention and program development, and program evaluation.

In addition to previously explored research, other areas of study offering potential benefit to blending families include attachment literature and childhood history and links to relational security, affect regulation, neuroscience of human relationships and relational styles. Investigation into these areas is important, particularly in view of the study findings that children “micro” focus on their present felt sense of unity, belonging, safety and security; and that parents “macro” focus at more of an executive level, thinking in terms of organization, management, direction and outcomes. Exploring the findings of this study that, individually and collectively for both parents and children, the most significant factors are behavioral (actions) vs. attitudes (beliefs) is recommended. A variety of comparative studies are indicated to examine the differences between individuals with different backgrounds/life experience: those who grew up in blending family and those who did not; those who had a positive experience in their blending families and those who did not, among others.

Examining the benefits of a “corrective experience” in blending family relationships and the benefits of remarriage/blending that reach the extended family, community, and other suprasystems would be beneficial. Positive Psychology and its connection with Transformational Learning Theory should be studied, as both provide an

uplifting approach to blending families in contrast to the historical deficit approach, which targets and emphasizes vulnerabilities and pathologies. Expanding blending family research to develop measures/predictors of successful family blending would provide an overlap with John Gottman's "love lab" research on marriage (Bischoff, 2002), which has successfully identified predictors of divorce. All of these types of research will support the development of clinical assessment tools and instrument design for blending families. Finally, the findings that behaviors are more important than attitudes in producing positive outcomes should be explored with other family forms, populations and outcome measures.

Summary

The research on blending stepfamilies affirms that this is a significant population in modern society [one-third of all Americans (Booth & Dunn, 1994) and involves over 10 million children under the age of 18 (Furukawa, 1994)], and that all blending families experience adjustment challenges, some with clinical significance (Portrie & Hill, 2005). Internalizing and externalizing maladaptive behaviors create academic, vocational, and interpersonal problems for family members. Researchers in the field have called for new research to fill existing gaps by providing knowledge about how blending families experience the merging of two families, contributing factors to blending outcomes (Michaels, 2006), and identifying the types of things successful stepfamilies do (Braithwaite et al., 2001). The findings of this dissertation study have expanded the understanding of the lived experience of blending stepfamilies and highlighted the factors that facilitate and hinder healthy family formation. Various activities and traditions (facilitators) were identified as critical to the creation of a new blended family identity

and culture. Activities and relational approaches/responses viewed as especially problematic and potentially lethal (obstacles) were also highlighted. Important distinctions were discovered in this research contrasting the parent and child blending experience. The study results make an important contribution toward creating accurate perceptions about this significant population, its challenges and needs, and also in opening doors for blending family practice, policy and research.

The pilot study served to test and refine research protocol and validate access to the blending family population. Use of the mixed methods research design yielded a dual perspective of blending stepfamilies – 1) highlighting the lived experience and 2) examining the importance of attitudes and behaviors on blending outcomes. While study results cannot be considered generalizable due to the fact that an experimental design was not employed, the utility and value of the findings should not be underestimated given 286 study participant responses.

Throughout this research project, the utility of the two selected theoretical frameworks (Dynamic Systems Theory and Transformational Learning Theory) in assessing and understanding blending families has been demonstrated. Using these two lenses to view blending stepfamilies as a distinct “family system” and as a “transformational product” of an antecedent traumatic divorce and subsequent remarriage enhances the understanding of the creation of this family system and its developmental process. These theoretical paradigms provided an organizing frame for the creation of the Blending Stepfamily Developmental Model (Feller, 2011), which identifies the central importance of communication in family blending and the critical need for families to learn to process together and perform behaviorally to achieve positive blending

outcomes. Exploring and validating the thematic constructs and factors that this study found contribute to and inhibit successful family formation in stepfamilies will be valuable for blending families, practitioners and policymakers. In order for needed change to occur in society and policy, program and intervention development, stepfamilies must be reframed and viewed through a strength-based lens as an extraordinary, unique and distinct family form in modern society.

APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD/ PROTOCOL SUMMARY

Research Summary
Version: August 10, 2010

**An Exploratory Study of the Lived Experience of Blending Families and Evaluation
of the Factors that Contribute to Blending Family Outcomes**

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BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION: This is a proposal to conduct an exploratory study on the blending together of stepfamilies and to evaluate the factors that contribute to the blending process. The purpose of the study is to understand the lived experience of stepfamilies in the process of blending and to identify factors that contribute to positive and negative stepfamily formation outcomes.

Blended families “are quickly becoming the dominant family structure” in the United States (Walsh, 1992, p.709). Nearly 65% of remarriages involve children from the prior marriage and form stepfamilies, and 60% of all remarriages eventually end in legal divorce (National Stepfamily Resource Center, 2006). Approximately one-third of all Americans are members of stepfamilies (Booth & Dunn, 1994), and a high percentage of those families will experience a second divorce (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1989).

Stepfamilies experience a variety of obstacles imbedded in the process of blending, including poor academic performance, work-related problems, and a multitude of health-related problems: mental health – conduct disorder, depression, substance abuse, and a variety of physical health concerns. In addition, stepfamily relations are characterized as more distant, conflictual, more prone to destructive parent-child coalitions, less competent in communication and problem solving, and having a greater potential for violence (Michaels, 2006). These instantly formed families experience the stigma of the “stepfamily effect” from a society and culture that view stepfamilies as an amalgamate product of failed marriages and broken homes (Portrie & Hill, 2005).

In a study of 20 “successful” stepfamilies, Kelley (1992) found several emerging themes: flexibility, patience, respect, communication, and sense of humor. In a similar study on the “Factors That Contribute to Stepfamily Success,” Michaels (2006) focused

on healthy stepfamily formation. She discovered overarching themes of “Informed Commitment” and “Sense of Family” and a litany of healthy stepfamily characteristics: central focus, realistic expectations, proactive stance, couple time/family time, faith in God, professional counseling, high level of maturity, “step” status non-existent, “easy-going” stepparent personality, mutual respect, welcoming feeling, supportive extended family, family identity creation via family activities, traditions, and history, night time talk “download,” pray together, and # 1 - supportive environment.

Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) discovered turning points for change and developmental trajectories typical of blending families. Ten of these turning points are reported with positive changes toward “feeling like a family,” including changes in household/family composition, holidays or special events, quality time, family crisis, reconciliation/problem solving, relocation or geographical move for household, pro-social actions, social network, change in employment for adults. Negative changes included: conflict or disagreement, unmet expectations or disappointment, negative intrapsychic change, and break up/divorce of marriage. The five basic trajectories of development for the first 48 months that blending families are together were identified as: Accelerated, Prolonged, Stagnating, Declining, and High-amplitude Turbulent. In a follow up study, Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, and Turman (2001) found that boundary management, solidarity and adaption were the three most salient issues in family blending.

Golish (2003) examined communication strengths in stepfamilies and found that all the stepfamilies “faced 7 primary challenges in their development: ‘feeling caught,’ regulating boundaries with a noncustodial family, ambiguity of parental roles, ‘traumatic bonding,’ vying for resources, discrepancies in conflict management styles, and building solidarity as a family unit” (Golish, 2003, p. 41). To manage these challenges, strong stepfamilies reported “using everyday talk, openness, spending time together as a family, communicating clear rules and boundaries, engaging in family problem solving, promoting a positive image of the noncustodial parent, and more consistency in perceptions about the severity of their problems” (p.41). Nicholson and Sanders (1999), in a study of the “Treatment of Child Behavior Problems in Stepfamilies,” reported that Behavioral Family Therapy (BFI) provided significant reductions in child behavior problems and couple conflict over parenting. Forgatch, Debarro, and Beldavs (2005) found that Marriage and Parenting in Stepfamilies (MAPS), a theory-based intervention designed to improve child home and school adjustment problems in stepfamilies, produced changes in parenting and significant reduction in problem behaviors of children at home and in school.

The literature supports the relevance of this important topic and calls for additional evidence-based research on the blending family process and interventions. Portrie and Hill (2005) highlighted this need in their review of the literature stating that there is “limited research addressing how blended families join together,” and Michaels (2006) echoed this sentiment concluding that “there is little research focusing directly on the factors that contribute to successful stepfamily formation.” This study will focus on both identified gaps in the literature via a mixed methods research design. Additionally, this study will expand the voice missing in much of the literature - the voice of stepchildren involved in the blending process.

OBJECTIVES: There are two sets of objectives due to the mixed methods research design. One set is qualitative and the other set is quantitative.

QUALITATIVE - The objective of the qualitative part of the study is to explore the lived experience of stepfamilies in the process of family formation/blending by answering the follow *research questions*:

- Q1. How do stepfamilies experience the process of blending/family formation?
- Q2. What do stepfamilies see as factors contributing to positive blending outcomes?
- Q3. What do stepfamilies view as impediments/obstacles to successful family formation outcomes?

QUANTITATIVE – The objective of the quantitative part of the study is to evaluate the association and contribution of behavioral characteristics related to both positive and negative family formation outcomes by answering the following *research questions*:

- Q1. Is there an association between common *thematic behavioral characteristics of stepfamilies*?
- Q2. Do behavioral characteristics function as contributing factors to blending success or blending failure in stepfamilies?
- Q3. What behavioral characteristics contribute most to blending success in stepfamilies?
- Q4. What behavioral characteristics are the greatest impediments to stepfamily blending success?

PARTICIPANT SELECTION CRITERIA: Participant couples and children meeting the following criteria will be included in this study: 1) they represent a *complex blending family* - both parents bring at least one child from a previous marriage and children from both parents are present in the home, and 2) the current marriage is a second + marriage for both of the partners. There are no other selection criteria regarding specific target characteristics for the population of focus. Ten remarried couples in the process of blending their two families will be interviewed, and 4 to 6 focus groups with children of blending families will be conducted. The focus groups will include 4 to 5 children in each group and will be comprised of children involved in the blending process. To provide groups with like participants and create a developmental and age appropriate forum, the focus groups will be divided into separate age groups: 8-12, 13-17 and 18+. Age bracketing in focus groups will be implemented to assist in creating a setting which avoids/minimizes participant bias, prevents conflict, and invites free expression. Ten qualitative couple interviews and 4 to 6 children focus groups with 4 to 5 participants in each group will be targeted in the qualitative portion of the study. Themes that emerge in the qualitative interviews and focus groups that are supported by the literature will be used to develop a quantitative survey. The survey will be taken individually and be offered to all qualitative study participants (approximately 20 parents and 16-30 children) and others meeting the participant criteria outlined above. The target for the quantitative survey is 50 to 60 and will be considered a pilot of the newly developed survey instrument.

DESIGN: The design of this study is mixed methods and includes qualitative interviews and focus groups that will focus on depth of information, inform the quantitative survey,

and assist in refining the survey instrument (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The qualitative portion of the study is exploratory and qualitative/interpretive and seeks to identify and describe recurring patterns of behavior and unveil meanings from the experiences of members of stepfamilies in the early years of life as a blending family. Grounded theory methods will govern the qualitative research. The grounded theory systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing the qualitative data (Charmaz, 2006) will assist in capturing a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of how parents and children as actors understand and ascribe meaning to their actions and experiences as blenders and blendees of families. Grounded theory is linked with constructionism and symbolic interactionism, all of which require that the researcher join the research setting and become part of the study (Charmaz, 2006). The couple interviews and focus groups are expected to yield saturation of data via repetitive themes and confirmatory responses. The quantitative portion of the study will focus on breadth of information and address common themes that have emerged from the qualitative interviews/focus groups and are confirmed in the literature and previous studies. The mixed methods design employs sequential, purposive snowball sampling, a technique "that documents diverse variations and identifies common patterns" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28).

STUDY PROCEDURES: Prior to participation in the study, an informed consent agreement will be provided to each prospective adult participant, which provides a description of the study objectives, risks and benefits. Informed consent is a requirement for participation. Participant couples will be interviewed together and/or receive surveys in their own homes or acceptable community sites which provide an environment conducive to uninterrupted and safe information exchange. Participating custodial parents will be asked if they are willing to permit their minor children to be given the opportunity to participate in the study and to sign a parental permission document. Children ages 8 and older are eligible to participate, and children under 18 years of age who have a parental permission document signed by the custodial parent will be asked if they would like to participate in the study. Any minor children under 18 years of age expressing interest will be given an assent form and receive an explanation of the purpose of the study, risks and benefits. All interested eligible children will then be asked if they have any questions before signing the assent form.

The qualitative interviews and focus groups will be in-depth focused interviews (exploratory [not interrogation], unrestricted, observational, validating, respectful [Charmaz, 2006]). The interview focus will be on the process of family formation, precipitating events to change, and relationship development within stepfamilies and the events and factors that influence both positive and negative blending outcomes. Qualitative interviews and focus groups will be conducted in single sessions and are expected to last between 60 and 90 minutes. During the research process, the researcher will take field notes, and after each interview thoughts and reactions to the interview process and information obtained will be journaled. The quantitative survey will employ contributing factors to the blending process identified in the common themes that emerge in the qualitative portion of the study which are confirmed by the literature and previous studies. The survey will evaluate each factor's contribution to positive and negative blending outcomes. The time to complete the survey is expected to take approximately

20 to 30 minutes. Participants will also be asked to sign a form requesting their permission to be contacted for future studies involving blending stepfamilies.

STATISTICAL METHODS, DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION:

In order to create a sound interpretation in the qualitative portion of the study, data collection and analysis will go hand in hand (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The data will be collected in couple and focus group audio-taped interviews which will be transcribed verbatim at the completion of the survey. Initially, the transcripts will be coded line-by-line and reviewed for in vivo codes – special terms or language used by the participants. After establishing a preliminary analytic direction, focused coding will be completed in order to evaluate, interpret, and synthesize larger sections of data according to thematic category (Charmaz, 2006). While each transcript/data set represents a unique individual perspective, the goal of the study is to ascertain from the aggregate interviews a more holistic view of the blending family process. Fieldnotes and journals will be used to augment individual interview data. Journals will record perceptions of the interview context and process, personal emotions, and any non-verbal communication and emotions expressed by the interviewee(s) (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

In the quantitative segment of the study, all survey data will be coded and entered into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 15, data software. First, a correlation analyses will be performed to investigate associations between thematic categories. The categories that emerged from the literature and previous studies include: Communication, Boundaries, Commitment, Relational Issues, Managing Conflict, Family Structure/System and blending success. Additional categories that surface in the qualitative strand of the study may be added. Finally, a standard multiple regression analysis will be completed to examine the predictive values of thematic categories/behavioral characteristics, gender, and age and other variables of blending success. The independent variables are expected to include: communication, boundaries, commitment, relational issues, managing conflict, family structure/system (all continuous); ordinal variables are expected to include: gender (male/female) and age; and the dependent variable is blending success (continuous). Other variables may be added based on the information that emerges from the qualitative study. Throughout the collection and analysis phase, all data collected, including participant personal information, will be kept strictly confidential.

ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSIBILITIES:

Study Resources: The resources available to the PI include:

- research associates at the Social Research Institute (SRI) and the College of Social Work at the University of Utah with significant experience in conducting individual qualitative interviews and research
- collaboration of the faculty in the SRI and College of Social Work in identifying, recruiting, and assisting in data analysis.
- access to space within SRI and the College of Social Work to conduct individual interviews

- access to laptop computer and audiotape devices
- access to SRI staff
- support of faculty advisor throughout the project

Maintaining Confidentiality: The interview transcripts, audiotapes, surveys, study field notes, and journals will be kept with the PI while interviewing, during travel to and from interview sites, and while traveling back to the PI's office located in the UUCSWSRI. The transcribed study data and surveys will be maintained on a password protected computer. All hard copies of data will be kept in a locked cabinet in the PI's office.

Recruitment: Participants will be recruited by using purposive, snowball sampling, a commonly used technique in qualitative and mixed methods research (Rubin & Babbie, 2005), and referrals will be pursued from private and public community behavioral and mental health care centers and community religious leaders. The purpose of the research will be explained to all study candidates and their informed consent will be obtained prior to their participation as described above.

APPENDIX B

IRB MEMO RE: USE OF THE TERM “BLENDING”

MEMO

Date: August 10, 2010

To: IRB Review Board

Re: Review of New Study

IRB Study: IRB_00043498

PI: Kelly Feller

Title: An Exploratory Study of the Lived Experience of Blending Stepfamilies and Contributing Factors to Blending Family Outcomes

I have made the changes/clarifications requested in the New Study Application, Protocol Summary, BF Consent Form, Parental Permission Form, and Assent Form except for the request to “Replace the word ‘Blending’ throughout with a more appropriate term like ‘how stepfamilies function.’ ” I am requesting that the word “blending” remain intact throughout the study application and consent forms as the title and focus of this study is on the “blending process” that stepfamilies experience as they bring two different family dynamics together physically and culturally. “Blending” is a term that is found throughout the literature and is commonly used in clinical work with stepfamilies. The word “step” is being challenged in the literature, current studies and practice as a term that can connote a derogatory meaning and/or social stigma. One of the foci of this study is to explore this concept and the meaning of social, esoteric and colloquial stepfamily terms and their impact on blending stepfamilies self-perceptions and their ability to integrate into a “non-stepfamily” society.

If you have any questions about this request, please feel free to reach me at (801)581-4515 or Kelly.Feller@socwk.utah.edu. Thank you for your consideration of this request and for your review of this important study.

APPENDIX C

CONSENT DOCUMENT FOR MINIMAL RISK BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH

Consent Document

Thank you for your willingness to learn more about participating in this research study. Before you decide to take part in this study, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Let the researcher know if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you will volunteer to take part in this study.

BACKGROUND

You are invited to participate in a research study that is exploring the blending process in stepfamilies. This study is being conducted in order to understand the unique challenges that stepfamilies face in the process of blending two families and the factors that contribute to blending family outcomes. Your participation as a parent of a stepfamily in the process of blending is very important to this study. We are also interested in having children who are involved in the blending process participate and share their experience and opinions.

This study is being conducted by Kelly Feller, a doctoral candidate in the College of Social Work at the University of Utah, as part of his dissertation. The results of this research will be used as a resource to assist and educate stepfamilies in the process of blending. It will also be used to provide information to clinicians and behavioral health care providers to assist them in providing better care to stepfamilies. Finally, it will also be used to inform administrators and policy makers with the objective of promoting program and policy development that supports blending families.

STUDY PROCEDURE

As a member of a stepfamily, you are invited to participate in an interview that will take between 60 and 90 minutes to complete. You and the researcher will engage in a discussion about the research topic. You will be asked questions about your own experience as a member of a stepfamily and your perception of the effect of the blending process on other family members. You will also be asked about your role in the family, your perspective of the strengths and challenges the family faces in the process of blending, and the resources that you feel are available to help your family. If you agree, the interview will be audio-taped. Sometime after the interview, you will also be invited to participate in a survey evaluating the positive and negative contributing factors to the stepfamily blending process. Participating in either part of the study and being audio-taped are both voluntary. You can drop out of the project at any time and without reason.

RISKS

The risks of being involved in this study are minimal. You may feel upset thinking about or talking about personal information related to blending two families together. These risks are similar to those you experience when discussing personal information with others. If you feel upset from this experience either during or after the interview or the survey, please tell the researcher, and he will tell you about resources available to help.

BENEFITS

FOOTER FOR IRB USE ONLY
Version: B0111



University of Utah
Institutional Review Board
Approved 8/10/2010
Expires 8/9/2011
IRB_00043498

There are no direct benefits to you for taking part in this study. However, there are many potential future benefits of this research, including learning more about the process of stepfamily blending, what factors contribute to successful blending outcomes, and what obstacles exist preventing successful family formation.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your personal data will be kept confidential. All data, text, and records, including computer and hard copies, will be stored in a locked filing cabinet or on a password protected computer located in the researcher's office. Only the researcher and members of his study team will have access to this information. No names will be used in any reports or on the transcripts. Each participant will be given a numerical code for the purposes of identification. Names and numerical codes will be kept separately.

All data and text, including computer, tapes, and hard copies, will be kept in a locked file and destroyed at the end of 7 years. The principal investigator is responsible for all aspects, including contacting participants, obtaining consents, conducting interviews, and analyzing data. The principal investigator may publish articles based on this study. Any publications about this research will protect your confidentiality and that of all other participants.

You should be aware, however, that there are some cases in which a researcher is obligated by law to report issues, such as serious threats to public health or safety. For example, if you disclose actual or suspected abuse, neglect, or exploitation of a child, or disabled or elderly adult, the researcher or any member of the study staff must, and will, report this to Child Protective Services (CPS), Adult Protective Services (APS) or the nearest law enforcement agency.

PERSON TO CONTACT

If you have questions, complaints or concerns about this study, or you feel you have been harmed as a result of your participation, you can contact the researcher, Kelly Feller [(801)581-4515, 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, messages can be left 24-hours a day; or by e-mail: Kelly.Feller@socwk.utah.edu]. If you are not comfortable contacting the researcher, you may contact Dr. Norma Harris, Director of the Social Research Institute, College of Social Work, University of Utah at 581-3822 between the hours of 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM Monday through Friday or by email: Norma.Harris@socwk.utah.edu.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant. Also, contact the IRB if you have questions, complaints or concerns that you do not feel you can discuss with the investigator. The University of Utah IRB may be reached by phone at (801) 581-3655 or by e-mail at irb@hsc.utah.edu.

Research Participant Advocate: You may also contact the Research Participant Advocate (RPA) by phone at (801) 581-3803 or by email at participant.advocate@hsc.utah.edu.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION



Participation in this study is voluntary. As a participant you can choose not to answer questions. Further, you are free to withdraw from this study at any time and without giving reason. Refusal to participate or the decision to withdraw from this research will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION TO PARTICIPANTS

There is no cost to you for being involved in this study other than the value of your time, and there is no compensation for your participation.

RESEARCH RESULTS / FUTURE RESEARCH

If you would like a copy of this research once the study is complete, please indicate by checking this box. ☐

Continuing research on blending families is very important and future studies are planned. Your participation would be very much needed and appreciated. If you are willing to be contacted and asked about your interest in participating in future studies, please check this box ☐

Please provide your contact information including email so that a copy of this study can be provided to you. If you have a permanent contact that you can provide in the event that you move from the area, please provide that information as well.

Name / Email

_____ / _____

Street Address/Apt. #

City / State / Zip Code

_____ / _____ / _____

Name / Email

_____ / _____

Street Address/Apt. #

City / State / Zip Code

_____ / _____ / _____

CONSENT

By signing this consent form, I confirm I have read the information in this consent form and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I will be given a signed copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date



Kelly C. Feller, MSW
Exploratory Study of the Lived Experience of Blending Families

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Printed Name of Researcher or Staff

Signature of Researcher or Staff_____
Date

APPENDIX D

PARENTAL CONSENT DOCUMENT

Parental Permission Document

BACKGROUND

Your child is being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not you would like your child to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you will allow your child to take part in this study.

This study is being conducted for the purpose of understanding the unique challenges that stepfamilies face in the process of blending two families together. This study is being conducted by Kelly Feller, a doctoral candidate in the College of Social Work at the University of Utah, as part of his dissertation. The results of this research will be used as a resource to assist and educate stepfamilies in the process of blending. It will also be used to provide information to clinicians and behavioral health care providers to assist them in providing better care to stepfamilies. Finally, it will also be used to inform administrators and policy makers with the objective of promoting program and policy development that supports blending families.

STUDY PROCEDURE

As part of this study your child will participate in a focus group with other children of blending stepfamilies. The focus group will last 60 to 90 minutes and include 4 to 5 children involved in the blending process. Focus groups will be organized by age (8-12, 13-17 and 18+) to create similar educational and life experience settings for participation. Children participating in focus groups will be asked questions about their experience as members of a blending stepfamily. Your child will be asked about family member roles, strengths and challenges the family faces in the process of blending, and the resources that are available to help your family. If you and your child agree, the focus group will be audio-taped. Participating and being audio-taped are both voluntary. Also, sometime after the focus group, your child will be asked to complete a short survey about blending stepfamilies. The survey will request your child's opinion about specific things that make it easier and more difficult for your family to blend together. The survey will take about 20 to 30 minutes. Your child can drop out of the project at any time and without reason.

RISKS

The risks of being involved in this study are minimal. Your child may feel upset thinking about or talking about personal information related to blending two families together. These risks are similar to those experienced when discussing personal information with others. If your child feels upset from this experience, you or your child can tell the researcher, and he will tell you about resources available to help.

BENEFITS

There are no direct benefits for taking part in this study. However, there are many potential future benefits of this research for families, providers and society, including learning more about the process of stepfamily blending, what factors contribute to successful blending outcomes, and what obstacles exist that prevent successful family formation.



CONFIDENTIALITY

Your child's data will be kept strictly confidential by the researcher and study team. All data and records, including computer and hard copies, will be stored in a locked filing cabinet or on a password protected computer located in the researcher's office. Only the researcher and members of his study team will have access to this information. No names will be used in any reports or on any transcripts. Each participant's data will be given a numerical code for the purposes of identification. Names and numerical codes will be kept separately. All data and text of any kind will be destroyed at the end of 7 years. The principal investigator is responsible for all aspects, including contacting participants, obtaining consents, conducting interviews, and analyzing data. While every effort will be made to insure that confidentiality is maintained by all study participants, the research team cannot guarantee that focus group participants will not share information. The principal investigator may publish articles based on this study. Any publications about this research will protect the confidentiality of your child and all other participants.

You should be aware, however, that there are some cases in which a researcher is obligated by law to report issues, such as serious threats to public health or safety. For example, if your child discloses actual or suspected abuse, neglect, or exploitation of a child, or disabled or elderly adult, the researcher or any member of the study staff must, and will, report this to Child Protective Services (CPS), Adult Protective Services (APS) or the nearest law enforcement agency.

PERSON TO CONTACT

If you have questions, complaints or concerns about this study, or you feel your child has been harmed as a result of participation, you can contact the researcher, Kelly Feller [(801)581-4515, 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, messages can be left 24-hours a day; or by e-mail: Kelly.Feller@socwk.utah.edu]. If you are not comfortable contacting the researcher, you may contact Dr. Norma Harris, Director of the Social Research Institute, College of Social Work, University of Utah at 581-3822 between the hours of 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM Monday through Friday or by email: Norma.Harris@socwk.utah.edu.

Institutional Review Board: Contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you have questions regarding your child's rights as a research participant. Also, contact the IRB if you have questions, complaints or concerns which you or your child do not feel you can discuss with the investigator. The University of Utah IRB may be reached by phone at (801) 581-3655 or by e-mail at irb@hsc.utah.edu.
Research Participant Advocate: You may also contact the Research Participant Advocate (RPA) 1by phone at (801) 581-3803 or by email at participant.advocate@hsc.utah.edu.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

It is up to you to decide whether to allow your child to take part in this study. Refusal to permit your child to participate or the decision to withdraw your child from this research will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which your child is otherwise entitled. Your child can choose not to answer questions and is free to withdraw from this study at any time and without giving a reason. If you choose to give permission for your child to participate, she/he is still free to refuse to participate. This will not affect your own or your child's relationship with the investigator.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION TO PARTICIPANTS

There is no cost to you or your child for being involved in this study other than the value of your time. Participating children will be given a pair of movie passes for their time and efforts to share their personal perspectives about blending stepfamilies in the group interview.



RESEARCH RESULTS / FUTURE RESEARCH

If you would like your child to have a copy of this research once the study is complete, please indicate by checking this box.

Continuing research on blending families is very important and future studies are planned. Your participation and that of your child will be very much needed and appreciated. If you are willing to permit your child to be contacted and asked about his/her interest in participating in future studies, please check this box.

Please provide the contact information for your child including email so that a copy of this study can be sent to him/her. If you have a permanent contact that you can provide in the event that your child moves from the area, please provide that information as well.

Name / Email _____ / _____
Street Address/Apt. # _____
City / State / Zip Code _____ / _____ / _____

Permanent Contact / Email _____ / _____
Street Address/Apt. # _____
City / State / Zip Code _____ / _____ / _____

CONSENT

By signing this consent form, I confirm I have read the information in this parental permission form and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I will be given a signed copy of this parental permission form. I voluntarily agree to allow my child to take part in this study.

Child's Name

Parent/Guardian's Name

Parent/Guardian's Signature

Date

Relationship to Child

Name of Researcher or Staff

Signature of Researcher or Staff

Date

APPENDIX E

CHILD ASSENT DOCUMENT

Assent to Participate in a Research Study

Who are we and what are we doing?

We are from the University of Utah, College of Social Work. We would like to ask you to be in a research study. A research study is a way to find out new information about something. This is the way we are trying to learn more about stepfamilies.

Why are we asking you to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because we want to learn more about how stepfamilies blend together.

What happens in the research study?

If you decide to be in this research study and your parent or guardian agrees, this is what will happen.

- We will ask you to be part of a group with 3 to 4 other children around your age who are also part of a stepfamily to talk about your experience as a member of a stepfamily.
- We will ask you and the other children to talk about your experiences as children involved in joining two stepfamilies together.
- We will look at things that help your family and things that are a challenge to your family.
- You will be in the group for about 60 to 90 minutes.
- If you and your parent agree, the group will be audio-taped.
- On another day a little while after the group, we will also ask you to complete a survey which will ask you to answer some questions so we can get your opinion about what you think makes it easier and more difficult for your family to blend together.

Will any part of the research study hurt you?

There is a chance that during this research study you could feel upset, embarrassed, sad or uncomfortable. We will try to help you feel better if this happens. You can stop at any time if you want to.

For IRB Use Only
Version: C3110



University of Utah
Institutional Review Board
Approved 8/10/2010
Expires 8/9/2011

Will the research study help you or anyone else?

We do not know for sure if being in this research study will help you. It is possible that we could learn something to help other stepfamilies to blend together some day.

Who will see the information about you?

Only the researchers will be able to see the information about you from this research study. We will not tell anyone else that you are in the study. The only time we would have to tell someone else is if you tell us you want to hurt yourself or someone else, or someone is hurting you or has hurt you. We will tell other adults about it so that we can help you feel better.

What if you have any questions about the research study?

It is okay to ask questions. If you don't understand something, you can ask us. We want you to ask questions now and anytime you think of them. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can call Kelly Feller [(801)581-4515, 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, leave messages 24-hours a day; or by email: Kelly.Feller@socwk.utah.edu, or ask us the next time we see you.

Do you have to be in the research study?

You do not have to be in this study if you don't want to. Being in this study is up to you. No one will be upset if you don't want to do it. Even if you say yes now, you can change your mind later and tell us you want to stop.

You can take your time to decide. You can talk to your parent or guardian before you decide. We will also ask your parent or guardian to give their permission for you to be in this study. But even if your parent or guardian says "yes," you can still decide not to be in the research study.

Can I get some feedback on the study when it's done?

If you want to have a copy of this research study once it is finished, please check this box and we will send one to your parent or guardian. ☐

For IRB Use Only
Version: C3110



University of Utah
Institutional Review Board
Approved 8/10/2010
Expires 8/9/2011

Will there be any research studies on blending stepfamilies in the future?

We are planning to do more research on blending stepfamilies. We would appreciate your help. If you would like us to contact you about new studies, please check this box. ☐

Agreeing to be in the study

I was able to ask questions about this study. Signing my name at the bottom means that I agree to be in this study. My parent or guardian and I will be given a copy of this form after I have signed it.

Printed Name

Sign your name on this line

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Assent

Signature of Person Obtaining Assent

Date

For IRB Use Only
Version: C3110



University of Utah
Institutional Review Board
Approved 8/10/2010
Expires 8/9/2011

The following should be completed by the study member conducting the assent process if the participant agrees to be in the study. Initial the appropriate selection:

_____ The participant is capable of reading the assent form and has signed above as documentation of assent to take part in this study.

_____ The participant is not capable of reading the assent form, but the information was verbally explained to him/her. The participant signed above as documentation of assent to take part in this study.

For IRB Use Only
Version: C3110



University of Utah
Institutional Review Board
Approved 8/10/2010
Expires 8/9/2011

APPENDIX F

LETTERS OF SUPPORT



UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
HEALTH CARE

Department of Psychiatry

February 17, 2010

To whom it may concern:

This is a letter of support for research that Kelly Feller, a University of Utah doctoral candidate in the School of Social Work, is conducting on blending families. Methods include recruiting a smaller number of families for interviews, and then a larger number of families for an anonymous survey. Both methods will include a consent process. At the University of Utah Child and Adolescent Behavioral Clinic we work with many families that are in the process of blending (both parents bringing children into a new marriage). Consequently, we are happy to provide access to our agency and clients in support of the proposed study. We grant permission for recruitment of study participants and for the administration of the research in accordance with the regulations of the University of Utah Institutional Review Board and our University Clinic client confidentiality requirements.

As a University Clinic, we have helped support many research projects, for trainees in a number of disciplines.

Any questions regarding this letter of support should be directed to my attention.

Sincerely,

Doug Gray, MD

Associate Professor

Director of Education and Training

University of Utah School of Medicine

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Doug Gray', written over a large, stylized circular flourish.

Resolutions

70 North Main, Suite 103

Bountiful, UT 84010

(801) 298-5222

February 10, 2010

To whom it may concern:

This is a letter of support for the research that Kelly Feller, a University of Utah doctoral candidate, is conducting on blending families. At Resolutions we work with many families that are in the process of blending and are happy to provide access to our agency and clients in support of the proposed study. We grant permission for recruitment of study participants and for the administration of the research in accordance with the regulations of the University of Utah Institutional Review Board and Resolutions Agency client confidentiality requirements.

Any questions regarding this letter of support may be directed to my attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kathie Keeler', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Kathie Keeler, LCSW

Agency Director



May 13, 2010

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I am writing this letter to endorse the importance of the research that Kelly Feller is conducting. Kelly is a doctoral candidate at the University of Utah and his research is focused on blending families. Family Counseling Center provides counseling services to numerous stepfamilies struggling with the challenges of integration and growth. We welcome the opportunity to provide access to our agency and willing clients in support of this proposed study. We will grant permission for the recruitment of study participants and for the administration of the research in accordance with the regulations of the University of Utah Institutional Review Board and all of Family Counseling Center's client confidentiality requirements.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Kathryn Della-Piana, LCSW
Executive Director



United Way of Salt Lake

5250 So. Commerce Drive #250 • Murray, Utah 84107 • Phone (801) 261-3500 • Fax (801) 261-2111



APPENDIX G

RECRUITMENT FLYER AND EMAIL

ARE YOU PART OF A STEPFAMILY?



Brady Bunch

or



Cinderella?

- ❑ SHARE YOUR OPINIONS ABOUT WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE IN A BLENDING STEPFAMILY
- ❑ TAKE PART IN A SHORT ON-LINE SURVEY
- ❑ SURVEYS FOR BOTH CHILDREN AND PARENTS
- ❑ OPEN THROUGH FEBRUARY 28TH
- ❑ CLICK ON LINKS BELOW

Questions – Kelly.Feller@socwk.utah.edu/
(801)581-4515 or (801)809-1049

APPENDIX H

BLENDING STEPFAMILIES COUPLE QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW GUIDE

BLENDING STEPFAMILIES COUPLE QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following seven (7) basic questions will guide the blending family *couple interview*, and prompts will be used as needed:

1. Demographic info – age when married / now? How long married? Where do you live?
2. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?
 - a. Probes – roots, friends, hobbies, interests, abilities, work, school
3. Tell me about your family?
 - a. Probes – how long married, roles, stepparent/bioparent, siblings, structure, system; activities, recreation, church, work, service, meals, prayer, meetings/councils, solidarity, family identity
4. What is it like to be part of a blending family?
 - a. Probes – easy/difficult, average day, relationship(s) satisfaction, getting along, traumatic bonding – “instant family, conflict management, challenges, non-custodial parent, resources, stigma, sibling rivalry, adolescent adjustment, boundaries, losses/gains,
5. How would you rate your family blending – scale of 1 to 10, 10 perfectly blended?
 - a. Probes - “feel like a family,” What would it take to get you to a perfect 10?, good/bad blending, family strengths/challenges, what would help..counseling, vacation, more resources, time together, family council/comm
6. What helps and what hinders your family blending?
 - a. Probes – communication, realistic expectations, flexibility/adaptation, conflict management skills/styles, interpersonal skills; dialectics - proactive/reactive, expected/unexpected, acceptance/patience for change, new approach/old system
7. What if/magic wand question relative to your family - what three things would you do?

APPENDIX I

BLENDING STEPFAMILIES CHILDREN FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

BLENDING STEPFAMILIES CHILDREN FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Demo info – age when parents married/age now? How long married? Where do you live?
2. Tell me a little bit about your family.
 - a. How mom and dad met
 - b. Where you live
 - c. How many siblings?
 - d. How do you like being part of a blending family?
3. Tell me about your mom/dad.
4. Tell me about your stepmom/stepdad.
5. Tell me about your stepsiblings.
 - a. Ages of the kids – close, overlap, separate
6. What is it like to be part of a blending family?
 - a. Easy/difficult
 - b. Typical day
7. Tell me about how your family communicates.
 - a. Open, directness, proactive
 - b. Family meetings/councils
 - c. Use the word “step”
 - d. Unity talk
 - e. Humor
 - f. Mom and dad protect each other
8. Tell me about how family boundaries.
 - a. Setting clear ground rules/expectations
 - b. Personal space – bedrooms, bathrooms
 - c. Extended family boundaries
 - d. Impact of non-custodial parent
9. Tell me about commitment
 - a. Mom and dad committed to each other
 - b. Marital unity
 - c. You
 - d. Siblings
 - e. Confident/uncertainty
 - f. Evidence of positive/negative outcome
 - g. Seeking resources

10. Relational issues

- a. Satisfaction – mom and dad, you, siblings
- b. How does everybody get along?
- c. Forced/traumatic bonding – “instant family”
- d. Equality
- e. Individualized treatment – one-on
- f. Time spent as a family/one-on-one time
- g. Patience to change/acceptance
- h. Realistic expectations
- i. Traumatic event – change
- j. Mom and dad put each other 1st
- k. Role model

11. Tell me about how conflict (problems) are handled.

- a. Discipline – 50/50, mom to her kids, dad to his, just dad
- b. Stepchild resistance
- c. Sibling rivalry
- d. Differences in parenting/personal biases
- e. Positive attitude
- f. Side bar/debrief
- g. Teaching/expressing empathy

12. Family structure/system

- a. Family activities
 - i. meals, work-chores, service, church, prayer, recreation, vacations
- b. New house – fresh start?

13. BSF unique issues

- a. Stigma - social impact (divorce, “broken family”)
- b. Adjustment – especially adolescent (2nd chance)
- c. Solidarity
- d. Family identity – do you feel like a family?
- e. Strengths/challenges
- f. Losses/gains

14. How would you rate your family blending – scale of 1 to 10, 10 perfectly blended?

- a. What would it take to get you to a perfect 10?
- b. Counseling, more resources, time together, family council/better communication

15. If you had a magic wand, what 3 things would you do to help your family?

APPENDIX J

BLENDING STEPFAMILIES SURVEY - PARENTS

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Parents

1. You are invited to take part in this important study to help us better understand the unique challenges that stepfamilies face. This survey should be taken by stepparents where both mom and dad bring a child or children to the marriage. It will take approximately 20 to 25 minutes for you to complete.

If you have any questions, you can contact the Principal Investigator (PI), [Kelly.Feller@socwk.utah.edu/(801)581-4515], or you can contact the University of Utah Institutional Review Board (IRB) [(801)581-3655 / irb@hsc.utah.edu] if you have any questions or concerns which you feel you cannot discuss with the PI.

All information collected in this survey will be kept confidential. Your participation is voluntary. You can choose what questions to answer and/or stop taking part in the survey at any time by clicking "Exit this survey" located at the top right corner of your screen. If you choose not to participate in this survey, click "I decline to take the survey." Clicking the "I would like to take the survey" button will indicate your consent to participate in this study.

- ☐ I want to take the survey.
- ☐ I decline to take the survey.

**** PLEASE READ SURVEY INSTRUCTIONS ****

- 1) For the following questions, please focus on home of the blending family and those who live there.
- 2) Answer the questions for the period of time when all or most of the children were in the home.
- 3) Please answer the questions as thoroughly and as accurately as possible.

2. I am a

- ☐ mother/stepmother
- ☐ father/stepfather

3. Where do you live?

City

State

Zip Code

4. How long have you lived in your current residence?

5. What is your occupation?

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Parents

6. Household income:

- ☐ Less than \$30,000
☐ \$30,000-40,000
☐ \$40,000-50,000
☐ \$50,000-60,000
☐ \$60,000-75,000
☐ \$75,000-100,000
☐ Over \$100,000

7. Do both parents work?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

8. Do parents work part time or full time?

	Works Part time	Works Full time
Mom	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Dad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. Ethnicity - I am

- ☐ African American
☐ Asian
☐ Caucasian
☐ Latino
☐ Native American
☐ Other (please specify)

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Parents**10. Education level**

- ☐ Attending elementary school
- ☐ Attending junior high
- ☐ Attending high school
- ☐ GED
- ☐ High school diploma
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Associate degree
- ☐ Bachelor degree
- ☐ Master degree
- ☐ Ph.D.
- ☐ Other (please specify)

11. Please use the drop-down menus to answer the following questions:

Age

What is your current age?

How old were you when
you married your current
spouse?**12. How long have you been married?**

Years Married

13. Do you have a religious preference?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

14. What is your religious preference?

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Parents

15. How often do you attend religious services?

- ☐ Weekly
☐ Monthly
☐ Occasional
☐ Seldom
☐ Never

16. Does your church provide any type of support for blending stepfamilies?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

17. What type of support does your church provide: (check all that apply)

- ☐ Counseling
☐ Classes
☐ Support groups
☐ Materials
☐ Common faith/focus
☐ Other (please specify)

18. What type is your stepfamily?

- ☐ *Traditional Stepfather Family* - stepdad lives with biological mom and her children
☐ *Mixed* - both dad and mom live together with some or all of their biological children
☐ *Stepmother Family* - stepmother lives with biological dad and his children

19. Please use the drop-down menus to answer the following questions:

How many children did
mom bring to the
marriage?

How many children did
dad bring to the marriage?

How many children total
for both mom and dad?

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Parents

23. Father's/Stepfather's Children:

Please provide the following information for each of the father's/stepfather's children in your family. Begin with the oldest child and end with the youngest child.

	Age	Age when parents married	Gender	Custody	Percent of time living in home	How well has the child adapted to the blending stepfamily dynamic?
Child 1	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 2	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 3	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 4	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 5	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 6	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 7	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 8	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

24. Including any children that mom and dad have had together, how many total children are a part of the blended stepfamily?

Total Children in Family	Total Children in Family
Total Children in Family	<input type="text"/>

25. Please use the drop-down menus to answer the following questions:

How many children live/lived in the home more than 50% of the time?	<input type="text"/>
How many children permanently live/lived outside your home?	<input type="text"/>

26. Is a parent at home when the children come home from school/activities?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Parents

27. What percentage of time is a parent at home with the children?

- ☐ 0%
☐ 25%
☐ 50%
☐ 75%
☐ 100%

28. Do one or both parents have flexible work schedules that allow time for attendance/participation in children's events?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

29. How flexible is your work schedule?

- ☐ Not flexible
☐ Somewhat flexible
☐ Flexible
☐ Very flexible

30. Does anyone in your family suffer from a diagnosed mental illness, emotional disorder or substance abuse-addictive disorder? Give information only for anyone who has an illness or disorder - choose the illness/disorder, how serious it is, if the family member is getting help, and when they started getting sick.

	Mental Illness/ Mood Disorder	Addictive Disorder	Type	Receiving Tx	Age of Onset
father	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
mother	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
son	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
son	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
son	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
son	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
daughter	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
daughter	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
daughter	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
daughter	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Other (please specify)

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Parents**31. What impact have the illnesses/disorders described above had on your family?****32. Who has the primary responsibility for discipline of the children in the home? (check only those that apply)**

- ☐ Mother/stepmother - at home with kids most of the time / by agreement
- ☐ Father/stepfather - role assignment / by agreement
- ☐ Joint - 50/50 sharing of responsibility
- ☐ Each parent provides the discipline for their own children
- ☐ Mother 75% / stepfather 25% split responsibility
- ☐ Mother 25% / stepfather 75% split responsibility
- ☐ Father 75% / stepmother 25% split responsibility
- ☐ Father 25% / stepmother 75% split responsibility

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Parents

33. Choose the rating that tells how important you think each of the things below are to help your family blend successfully.

	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Very Important	Not Important
Mom and dad are unified and on the "same page."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finding and using information to help the family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad being committed to each other.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad being committed to blending the family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parents spending one-on-one time with each child in the family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Maintaining equality between all the children.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad being positive and happy in the marriage.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The family maintains a positive attitude.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Holding family meetings/councils.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Not using the word "step" when referring to family members.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Doing regular family activities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Developing new family traditions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Eating together as a family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Feeling like a family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having patience to change.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The older kids in the family becoming "big brothers" and "big sisters" to younger siblings.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Setting clear expectations; negotiating and defining family roles and boundaries.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Maintaining custody boundaries and time limitations with non custodial parents.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Developing a new blended system for discipline that both parents agree on.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having flexibility and using constructive conflict management.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Spend time talking about how and preparing to blend our two families together.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having realistic expectations.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Parents

34. Choose the rating that tells how often your family does each of the things below.

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Occasionally	Never
Mom and dad are unified and on the "same page."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We use information and resources to help us.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad are committed to each other.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad are committed to blending the family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parents spend one-on-one time with each child.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Maintaining equality between all of the children in our home.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The parents work on making the marriage relationship positive and happy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We work at maintaining a positive attitude.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We hold family meetings/councils in our family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We use the term "step" in our family when referring to family members.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We have regular family activities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We are working to develop new family traditions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We eat together as a family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We feel like one family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having patience to change.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The older kids in our family act like "big brothers" and "big sisters" to younger siblings.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We set clear expectations, negotiate, and define family roles and boundaries.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Custody boundaries and time limitations are maintained with non custodial parents.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We use a new blended discipline system that both parents agree on.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having flexibility and constructive conflict management.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We spend time talking about and working on blending our two families together.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having realistic expectations.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

35. Choose the rating that tells how much you agree or disagree with each of statements below.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
We feel we are meant to be together.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Our marriage is positive and happy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We maintain a positive attitude in blending our family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My spouse is committed to me and blending our family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am committed to my spouse and blending our family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Our children are committed to each other and blending our family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How conflict and discipline are managed in our home is similar to the non-custodial/other home.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Parents**36. Our family does the following things to help us blend together: (check all that apply)**

- ☐ Research/self-education: books, articles, Internet
- ☐ Support group
- ☐ Educational group
- ☐ Couple counseling
- ☐ Family counseling
- ☐ Speaking with other stepfamily blenders
- ☐ We did nothing

Other (please specify)

37. Do you have a friend, family member, counselor or anyone else who has helped you and your family blend together?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

38. Who helped you? (check all that apply)

- ☐ Professionals - counselors, therapists, etc.
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Other blending parents/families
- ☐ Parents
- ☐ Family Members

Other (please specify)

39. What did they do to help? Please describe.**40. How has it helped you and your family?**

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Parents

41. If information and resources were available to help you successfully blend your two families, from whom would you feel most comfortable receiving that help? (check all that apply)

- ☐ Professional counselors/therapists
- ☐ Clergy - church counselors/leaders
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Other blending parents/families
- ☐ Parents
- ☐ Family Members
- ☐ Books/Articles
- ☐ Workshops/Trainings

Other (please specify)

42. Has there been a positive turning point in your family's blending process?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Please describe/explain.

43. Has there been a negative turning point in your family's blending process?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Please describe/explain.

44. What are the three (3) most important points of advice you would give a new blending family who is just getting started?

1	<input type="text"/>
2	<input type="text"/>
3	<input type="text"/>

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Parents

45. We would love to have you be a part of future studies. Checking yes below does not commit you to participate, it only allows us to contact you to see if you are interested. Check the second box if you would like to have a copy of this study when it's completed.

- ☐ Yes, you may contact me in the future to see if I am interested in participating in other studies.
- ☐ Please send me a copy of the completed blending stepfamily research.

46. Please provide your permanent contact information below including phone number, email and address.

Name

Phone/email

Street Address/Apt.#

City/State/Zip Code

Thank you for taking time to participate!

APPENDIX K

BLENDING STEPFAMILIES SURVEY - CHILDREN

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Children

1. We are inviting you to be in this research study because we want to learn more about how stepfamilies blend together. This survey can be taken by children in stepfamilies: 1) who are at least 8 years of age and 2) whose parents (both mom and dad) have a child or children when they get married. It will take you about 15 to 20 minutes to complete this survey.

If you have any questions, you can contact the Principal Investigator (PI), [Kelly.Feller@socwk.utah.edu / (801)581-4515], or you can contact the University of Utah Institutional Review Board (IRB) [(801)581-3655/irb@hsc.utah.edu] if you have any questions or concerns which you feel you cannot discuss with the PI.

Only researchers will be able to see information about you from this study. We will not tell anyone else that you are in the study. You can choose what questions to answer and/or stop taking the survey at any time by clicking "Exit this survey" located at the top right corner of your screen. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you choose not to take this survey, click "I do not want to take the survey." Clicking the "I want to take the survey" button means that you agree to be in this study.

- ☐ I want to take the survey.
- ☐ I do not want to take the survey.

**** PLEASE READ SURVEY INSTRUCTIONS ****

- 1) For the following questions, please focus on home of the blending family and those who live there.
- 2) Answer the questions for the period of time when all or most of the children were in the home.
- 3) Please answer the questions as thoroughly and as accurately as possible.
- 4) Leave information blank if you do not know the answer.

2. I am a

- ☐ daughter/stepdaughter
- ☐ son/stepson

3. Where do you live?

City

State

Zip Code

4. How long have you lived in your current home?

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Children

5. Do you have a job? If so, what do you do?

6. What is your household income (how much money both mom and dad earn together):

- ☐ Less than \$30,000
- ☐ \$30,000 - 40,000
- ☐ \$40,000 - 50,000
- ☐ \$50,000 - 60,000
- ☐ \$60,000 - 75,000
- ☐ \$75,000 - 100,000
- ☐ Over \$100,000
- ☐ Don't know

7. Do both of your parents work?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

8. Do your parents work part time or full time?

	Works Part time	Works Full time
Mom	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Dad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. What is your ethnicity?

I am -

- ☐ African American
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Caucasian (white)
- ☐ Latino
- ☐ Native American
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Children**10. What is your education level?**

- ☐ Attending elementary school
- ☐ Attending junior high
- ☐ Attending high school
- ☐ GED
- ☐ High school diploma
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Associate degree
- ☐ Bachelor degree
- ☐ Master degree
- ☐ Ph.D.
- ☐ Other (please specify)

11. Please use the drop-down menus to answer the following questions:

Age

How old are you?

How old were you when
your parents got married?**12. How long have your parents been married?**

Years

13. Do you attend a church?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

14. What is the name of your church or religion?

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Children

15. How often do you attend your church?

- ☐ Weekly
☐ Monthly
☐ Occasional
☐ Seldom
☐ Never

16. Does your church do anything to help your family blend together?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

17. What kinds of things does your church do to help you and your family: (check all that apply)

- ☐ Counseling
☐ Classes
☐ Support groups
☐ Educational materials
☐ Common faith/focus
☐ Other (please specify)

18. What type of a stepfamily do you have?

- ☐ *Traditional Stepfather Family* - stepdad lives with biological mom and her children
☐ *Mixed* - both dad and mom live together with some or all of their biological children
☐ *Stepmother Family* - stepmother lives with biological dad and his children

19. Please use the drop-down menus to answer the following questions:

How many children did
mom bring to the
marriage?

How many children did
dad bring to the marriage?

How many children total
for both mom and dad?

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Children

20. Have mom and dad had any children together?

☐ Yes

☐ No

21. How many children have mom and dad had together:

Please give as much of the information as you can for each of the children that the parents have had together. Begin with the oldest child and end with the youngest.

	Current age	Gender	How well has the child adapted to the blending stepfamily dynamic?
Child 1	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 2	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 3	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 4	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 5	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 6	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 7	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 8	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

22. Mom's/Stepmom's Children:

Please give as much information as you can for each of the children that mom/stepmom brought to the family. Begin with the oldest child and end with the youngest.

	Current Age	Gender	Custody	How well has the child adapted to the blending stepfamily dynamic?
Child 1	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 2	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 3	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 4	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 5	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 6	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 7	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 8	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Children

23. Dad's/Stepdad's Children:

Please give as much information as you can for each of the children that dad/stepdad brought to the family. Begin with the oldest child and end with the youngest.

	Current Age	Gender	Custody	How well has the child adapted to the blending stepfamily dynamic?
Child 1	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 2	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 3	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 4	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 5	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 6	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 7	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Child 8	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

24. How many total children are a part of your blended stepfamily?

Total Children in Family

Total Children in Family

25. Is a parent at home when the children come home from school/activities?

☐ Yes

☐ No

26. How often is a parent at home with the children?

☐ 0%

☐ 25%

☐ 50%

☐ 75%

☐ 100%

27. Do mom or dad have flexible work schedules so they can come to events to support the kids?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Children

28. How flexible are your parent's work schedules?

- ☐ Not flexible
☐ Somewhat flexible
☐ Flexible
☐ Very flexible

29. Does anyone in your family suffer from a diagnosed mental illness, emotional disorder or substance abuse-addictive disorder? Give information only for anyone who has an illness or disorder - choose the illness/disorder, how serious it is, if the family member is getting help, and when they started getting sick.

	Mental Illness/ Mood Disorder	Addictive Disorder	Type	Receiving Treatment	Age of Onset
father	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
mother	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
son	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
son	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
son	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
son	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
daughter	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
daughter	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
daughter	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
daughter	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Other (please specify)

30. How does the illness/disorder affect your family?

31. Who does the disciplining of the children in your family? (check only those that apply)

- ☐ Mother/stepmother - because she's at home with kids the most
☐ Father/stepfather - that's what dads do
☐ Together - mom and dad share the responsibility 50/50
☐ Each parent disciplines his/her own kids
☐ Mom does most, but dad does some
☐ Dad does most, but mom does some

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Children

32. Choose the rating that tells how important you think each of the things below are to help your family blend successfully.

	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Very Important	Not Important
Mom and dad are unified and on the "same page."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finding and using information to help the family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad being committed to each other.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad being committed to blending the family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad spending one-on-one time with each child.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Maintaining equality between all the children.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad being positive and happy in the marriage.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The family maintains a positive attitude.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Holding family meetings/councils.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Not using the word "step" when referring to family members.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Doing regular family activities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Developing new family traditions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Eating together as a family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Feeling like a family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having the patience to work and wait for change.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The older kids in the family becoming "big brothers" and "big sisters" to younger siblings.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Setting clear expectations for the children & everyone in the family	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Negotiating and defining family roles and boundaries.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Maintaining a good relationship with non-custodial parents (parents who have the kids every other weekend/for a while in the summer).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having a discipline system that both parents agree on.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Being flexible and looking for the positive when dealing with family conflicts.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Spending time talking about how the family can do better at blending together.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having realistic expectations.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Children

33. Choose the rating that tells how often your family does each of the things below.

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Occasionally	Never
Mom and dad are unified and on the "same page."	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We use information and resources to help our family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad are committed to each other.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad are committed to blending the family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad spend one-on-one time with each child.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Everyone is treated equally in our home.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The parents work on making the marriage relationship positive and happy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We work at maintaining a positive attitude.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We hold family meetings/councils in our family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We use the term "step" in our family when referring to family members.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We have regular family activities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We are working to develop new family traditions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We eat together as a family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We feel like one family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having patience to see positive change.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The older kids in our family act like "big brothers" and "big sisters" to younger siblings.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Everyone in the family knows what is expected and tries to do their part.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Maintaining a good relationship with non-custodial parents (parents who have the kids every other weekend/for a while in the summer).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Using a discipline system that both parents agree on.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Being flexible and looking for the positive when dealing with family conflicts.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We spend time talking about how the family can do better at blending together.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having realistic expectations.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

34. Choose the rating that tells how much you agree or disagree with each of statements below.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
We feel we are meant to be together.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad's relationship is positive and happy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
We maintain a positive attitude in our family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad are committed to each other.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mom and dad are committed to blending our family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am committed to my siblings and our family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My siblings are committed to me and our family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conflict and discipline are handled in a similar way in our home and the non-custodial (other home).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Children**35. My family does the following things to help us blend together: (check all that apply)**

- ☐ Research/self-education: books, articles, Internet
- ☐ Support group
- ☐ Educational group
- ☐ Couple counseling
- ☐ Family counseling
- ☐ Speaking with other stepfamily blenders
- ☐ We do nothing

Other (please specify)

36. Do you have a friend, family member, counselor or anyone else who has helped you and your family blend together?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

37. Who helped you? (check all that apply)

- ☐ Professionals counselors, therapists, etc.
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Other blending kids/parents/families
- ☐ Parents
- ☐ Family Members

Other (please specify)

38. What did they do to help? Tell about it.**39. How did it help you and your family?**

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Children

**40. If you could get help for you and your family, who would you like to get it from?
(check all that apply)**

- ☐ Professional counselors/therapists
- ☐ Clergy -church counselors/leaders
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Other blending kids/parents/families
- ☐ Parents
- ☐ Family Members

Other (please specify)

41. Can you think of a time when a positive change took place for your family as you were blending together?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Tell about it.

42. Can you think of a time when a negative change took place for your family as you were blending together?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Tell about it.

43. What are the three (3) most important things you would tell a new blending family who is just getting started?

1

2

3

Blending Stepfamilies Survey_Children

44. We would love to have you be a part of studies in the future. Checking yes below does not commit you to taking part, it only allows us to contact you to see if you are interested. Check the 2nd box if you would like to have a copy of this study when it's completed.

☐ Yes, you can contact me to see if I am interested in taking part in other studies.

☐ Please send me a copy of this study when it's finished.

45. Please fill in your permanent contact information below including phone number, email and address.

Name

Phone/email

Street Address/Apt.#

City/State/Zip Code

Thank you for taking this survey!

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